



Learning about colonialism.

High school students' perception of Italian
colonial history.

Camilla Guerrato

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Abstract

Unlike the case of other European colonial powers that took part in the imperialist project between the end of the 1800s and the early 1900s, the Italian colonial experience in Libya and the Horn of Africa (1889-1947) does not count with extensive literature, either academic or artistic. The reason why this is so, is that the colonial venture has long been envisaged by the post-war political ruling class as a parenthesis of national history marked by shame and defeat whose public debate would create both internal controversies and international disapproval. The topic of colonial memory has long been dismissed and repressed on two fronts: at an institutional level, admission of colonial wrongdoings publicly happened only in the nineties; at an academic level, archives of the official colonial documentation have been set aside under the monopoly of an especially created committee thus greatly hindering historiographical research. These two issues become intertwined in the debated framework of public education, where history teaching becomes the tool for the reproduction of collective memory and the shaping of national identity. This research analyses the still withstanding legacy of colonial history among young Italians employing three different approaches to the qualitative methodology. A range of topics come into play when the legacy of colonial history and its memory meet the dynamic, multicultural, postcolonial Italian society that has been developing in the contemporary global era: perception of the immigration phenomenon, racist revivals, eurocentrism, definition of Italianness and survival of myths.

KEYWORDS: Italian colonialism, education, national identity, race and class, collective memory

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*“Italian society will renew itself to the extent to
which it will be able to renew education.”*

(L. Pedrazzi, La scuola senza riforma, in “Il Mulino”, n. 1, 1951,)¹

¹ Free Translation from the Original Italian

Introduction

Introduction to the research topic:

Researching about the legacy of the colonial history in the contemporary society is a work that poses numerous challenges in the Italian context. Italy has undergone significant changes in the last decades and since the end of WWII and the collapse of the fascist regime there has been a communal effort of the Italian political ruling class to redefine the country beyond its totalitarian experience. However, by rethinking Italianness and the role of Italy in European history, the ruling class has concealed uncomfortable elements of the past with the aim of creating homogeneity and a sense of belonging. As a consequence of this attitude the colonial event has been cast away from the collective memory in favour of the survival of the politics of nostalgia that allowed maintaining consent among the public opinion. In fact, according to one of the major historians of the Italian colonial experience "the lack of debate about colonialism and the lack of the condemnation of its most brutal aspects have favoured the process of removal of colonial faults"² (Del Boca, 1998, p.591) and fostered the thriving of self-forgiveness in the social realm. The fact that the Italian colonial experience underwent processes that were not typical of other colonial enterprises has long sustained apologetic rhetoric. For example, unlike the case of other colonial powers, the decolonization did not coincide with the beginning of the postcolonial period. Italy, in fact, ruled in Eastern and Northern Africa between 1890 and 1943, and yet the official declaration of renunciation to the colonial empire was signed by Italy only four years later in 1947, complementary to the Paris Peace Treaty after WWII. In addition to this, the empire was lost by hand of international agreements and not by the emerging of liberation movements leading to independence wars in the occupied territories. These facts led the Italian ruling class to demanding back the domination over the pre-fascist colonies fostered by the idea of mutilation and nostalgic reaction for the imposed decision. One more element that has told apart the experience of Italy and the other European powers stands in the development of the relationship between the metropolis and the peripheral territories: unlike the case of France or the UK, the Italian

² Free Translation from the Original Italian

reality has not been characterised by consistent immigration inflows from the former colonies right after the collapse of the empire nor in the following decades.

The fundamental premise that stands at the origin of this work is that Italy is a postcolonial country. Even if the widespread perception within the Italian society often does not reflect this statement, historiography has proved that the Italian experience of occupation in Northern and Eastern Africa is in fact assimilated to the more complex phenomenon of European imperialism. By embarking on the colonial venture the Italian government and army have employed violence to occupy territories and oppress populations to obtain international prestige, internal consent and economic advantage in the same way as any other colonial power. This holds Italy responsible for contributing to the unequal dynamics of modern domination that gave shape to the contemporary international power-balance relation (Araújo and Maeso, 2010, p. 239) . Despite the colonial experience being considered limited in relation to that of other European powers both due to the limited extension of territories occupied and owing to the short time span of rule, the legacy of this historical phenomenon still exists in present-day Italy. The general attitude from the side of the institutions has long been that of denial and silencing therefore hindering the development of a public debate over the colonial question and its social repercussions.

Talking about Italy as postcolonial country does not mean to focus exclusively on its colonial past, in fact, in the expression 'postcolonial' does not suggest the overcoming of the colonial period, yet the still existing relationship between the realities that were involved in the colonial process. These same territories and societies are experiencing phenomena that are shaping the world we live in such as capitalism, globalization, denationalization within the framework of postcolonialism. (Bassi and Sirotti, 2010; Lombardi-Diop and Romero, 2012). The social changes shaping the Italian public space are to be considered as a "set of (trans)national features and processes which should be thought of as historically connected and not as randomly occurring and overlapping events in the Italian social space" (Mellino, 2012 p.86). In this wider view the topics of racism, national identity, memory and immigration are necessarily interwoven to the colonial legacy.

In the light of this theoretical framework, the modality chosen to carry out this study is in connection to the field of education. The way in which institutions are willing to

communicate about the colonial experience to the public are a symptom of the memory the state intends to pass down of these specific events. The schooling system, in fact, follows normatives issued by the Ministry of Education and allows access to the study of history to all children and future citizens. Due to the role of history teaching in the rooting of the students' collective memory and national values, different political forces enter this debate. This specific piece of research is hinged on the youngsters' perception of a view of the colonial experience and the connections they create between this phenomenon and the contemporary society on the basis of the school teachings. The practical field work took place in one high school institute in Northern Italy involving not only students attending different curricula and their teachers, but was also based on the analysis of the history textbook; a fundamental tool in the study of the subject whose editing and distribution are strictly linked to the ministry's guidelines.

Structure and chapters:

In the last few decades, historians and academics have become increasingly interested in the history of the Italian colonial phenomenon since the archives and official documents have become open to academics. Reappropriation of the forgotten topic of the Italian colonialism aims at unveiling its legacy in connection to the contemporary social realm.

In order to delve into the teaching approach of the historical events and the diverse aspects of influence according to the youngsters' view of the contemporary society, this research is divided in four chapters. Each one of them is hinged on one aspect of contemporary society molded by the colonial legacy that was brought into question by the interaction with the students and the history teachers and by the textbook analysis. The first chapter features a brief summary of the colonial process, the definition of research framework, objectives and methodology; the second inquires the topic of collective memory in relation to the colonial process; the third focuses on nationalism, identity and the feeling of belonging; the last chapter investigates the racialization of the Italian society in view of modern day immigration flows.

The first chapter engages in the creation of an overview of the research background including highlights of the historical events that marked the Italian expansion in Libya and the

Horn of Africa to contextualize the role of Italy and the occupied territories in the socio-economic and political framework of the European imperialism. In addition to the historical summary, the first chapter reports the attitude of the Italian institutions in facing decolonization after WWII and introduces the topic of postcolonialism and the way in which this concept is perceived in Italy as detached from the contemporary reality of the country. In this environment some space will be dedicated to the delayed development of the colonial historiography and postcolonial studies. This chapter includes an insight in the role of history teaching as a powerful tool the institutions dispose of in order to pass down approved historical knowledge. This influence is exerted especially by means of the Ministry of Education guidelines that are followed closely in the creation and editing of history manuals. Following this, chapter one provides the reader with basic information about the socio-economic background of the subjects involved in the field work and describes the methodological approach employed.

The second chapter focuses on the theory of forgetfulness in the contemporary era applying it to the way in which the Italian post-war ruling class has influenced the definition of collective memory. The ruling class, in fact, played a relevant role in the silencing of the colonial experience in the wider framework of historical revisionism of the fascist phenomenon. The lack of condemnation and the concealing of the official documentation impeded the development of studies and debate over the topic thus creating a blank in the collective memory filled by myths and nostalgia. Even though reminders of colonialism are present in the contemporary society, this phenomenon has been emptied of its significance. All these elements considered, education – in the specificity of history teaching – provides the tool for the creation of homogeneous institution-approved collective memory.

The third chapter is hinged on the legacy of the colonial experience in the sphere of national belonging and identity. After the collapse of the fascist regime, in fact, the institutions focused on fostering the creation of a homogeneous idea of nation in order to erase former political divisions and foster unity. However, the desire for social cohesion by suppression of differences clashed with the idea of leading the nation to a debate on its postcolonial condition. Avoiding this confrontation allowed re-iteration of fascist myths and colonialist stereotypes. The different Ministries of Education have played a significant role in the definition of elements of nationality through the school reforms. In the framework of

history teaching, eurocentric and nationalist ideals are fostered alongside the survival of binary categorisation.

The last chapter faces the way in which the topic of race, and as a consequence immigration, is faced in present day Italy in connection to the colonial history and survival of stereotypes and myths both inside and outside the schooling system. During the field work, the topic of race is discussed in relation to its historical roots in the light of colonialism, emigration, the Southern question, globalization, and contemporary racist revival linked to the shared concept of Italianness. In fact, the lack of a process of Italian decolonization clashes with the increasing need to face the past in order to deal with the present featuring the stabilization of immigration as a permanent phenomenon.

In addition to direct interaction with students and teachers aimed at fully explore the above-mentioned topics, part of the research included textbook analysis hinged on the following elements: visual support to the text, terminology and expressions directed at the subjects involved in the colonial experience, explicit relationship with contemporary events, presence of informative elements over the African realities involved, stereotypes and myths featuring the text.

All in all this research aims at analyzing the contemporary social practices, public discourse and cultural production being passed down through schooling in the specific environment of history teaching under the light of postcoloniality. This means that today's global world still undergoes the effects of the imbalance of colonial power.

Understanding the youngster's perception of the colonial phenomenon and in which ways its legacy influences their outlook of the society, is the first step towards the redefinition of Italian identity as a postcolonial society.

Chapter I:

The Italian postcolonial condition; a legacy for the younger generations

I.1. Background to the study:

When reading upon the history of the Italian colonial experience in Africa between 1889 and 1947 and its current postcolonial condition, one is likely to come across expressions such as neglected history (Del Boca, 2003), lack of critical analysis (De Michele, 2006; Tappi and Leoni, 2010), "contradictions of the memory" (Labanca, 2002, p.8), "marginality of Italian postcolonial studies" (Lombard-Diop and Romeo, 2012, p.12). The study of Italian occupation of Northern and Eastern Africa is defined as "a minefield" (Labanca, 2002, p.461) and legacies of the colonial experience in the contemporary society can be found only "if one knows where to look" (Mia Fuller, 2001; quoted by Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012, p.8).

All these expressions convey a sense of blurry, fleeting and incomplete topic showing that the Italian postcolonial debate, in all its declinations, finds itself at the fringe of cultural, economic, social and political discourse.

Postcolonial³, as a term, implies the continuity of the relations between countries and cultures previously linked by the colonial bond. The development of these realities is

³ The postcolonial studies, not to be confused with the study of colonialism and imperialism, intend to analyse the transformation of the world since the colonial process. In so doing they focus on deconstructing the inherited colonial mindset, for instance by the shattering the binary category of colonized-colonizer. Postcolonial studies aim at understanding the colonial phenomenon in the wider overview of mutual influence and interconnection at all levels. This current of studies gains international relevance with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 (translated in Italy only in 1991) and further expands in the Anglo-Saxon world thanks to the major contribution of Bhabha and Spivak in the eighties. The development of the postcolonial studies, initially hinged on the British and French experience in the Middle East and the Indian universe have then gained ground in the global realm including the African-European experience. In addition to drawing from a increasingly wider range of geographies, the postcolonial studies have been sweeping across different fields of interest too. In fact, the vision of deconstruction of conventional Western-based knowledge could be applied to different fields including the study of linguistics, diaspora, race, gender and feminism, urban planning, arts such as cinema literature, pop culture, history, economics, international relations, human rights, politics and so forth.

undeniably interwoven, reciprocally influencing social practices and cultural forms maintaining continuity through legacy in different shapes (Bassi and Sirotti, 2010; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012). Postcolonialism, per se, in fact, is a wide term that can be applied to the historical, political, economic, linguistic, cultural and social environment "to define both a critical and theoretical approach as well as a historical period that begins with decolonization and extends to contemporary migrations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to Europe and North America" (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012, p. 2). These considerations underline the everpresent reference of the term 'postcolonial' to the transformations that the colonial process has triggered and which are now contributing to shaping of the contemporary world.

Due to the emphasis bestowed upon the peculiarities of the Italian condition, even if the country actually underwent full-fledged colonialism, the Italian society has proved not to perceive itself as involved in the postcolonial landscape. As a matter of fact, the postcolonial theory developed in the anglophone world: the British colonial experience had been quite different from the Italian presence in Africa, extremely limited in time and space. The postcolonial debate developed in the British realm did not seem to translate to the Italian reality thus implying that, since those theories were not applicable to the Italian condition, there was no postcolonial debate to carry on; this attitude reinforced the silencing on the matter.

In its original debate elaborated within the Anglo-Saxon matrix, the postcolonial discourse was related to the development of the colonial process that had triggered social and political responses in the case of the main European colonial powers. The British and French decolonization experience had involved wars for independence driven by the very liberation forces of the peripheries that were followed by the raise of anti-colonial movements in the metropolis. These events led to the spreading of awareness in the metropolis of the implications of the colonial phenomenon. Due to the structure of the British and French empire, the decolonization was followed by consistent immigration flows from the former colonies transforming the social tissue into a multicultural fabric. These developments, so outstanding in the public realm, contributed to the fuelling of the postcolonial debate. Despite the existence of common features between the Italian experience and that undergone by the rest of the European imperialist powers, the outcomes that reached the public were

profoundly different. This allowed the Italian society to dodge public engagement in the topic, thus reinforcing the idea of the postcolonial debate not being applicable to the Italian reality (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012).

The issue of memory is central to the colonial discourse in Italy also due to the fact that the end of colonialism happened at different times for different subjects involved namely Italians in Italy, Italian settlers in the colonies and the populations living in the territories under the colonial rule; decolonization of the minds never really took place, we can only detect different phases and inclinations of fading out of the memory (Labanca, 2002, Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005).

In the same way in which the postwar ruling institutions complicated the access to knowledge on the colonial history – archives were opened only in the 1960s – (Labanca, 2002), the role of media is not to be underestimated, in fact social memory is constituted of images of the past that legitimate present social order and depend on the passing down of memory across generations (Connerton, 1989). In addition to this, forgetfulness is a process of "cultural discarding" (Connerton, 2009, p. 79) in which the media play a role through the dematerialization and overload of information leading to inability of the receivers to assimilate it and create a link between past and present (Connerton, 2009). According to Connerton (1989; 2009) memory as a collective entity is legitimized and shaped by rituals and commemorative events that strengthen the feeling of belonging of the community that performs them while it is strongly shaken by change, instead. In this framework it is possible to bring to light the modifications in the notions of national belonging, Italianness and multiculturalism that Italy is undergoing as a result of the globalization phenomena and international migratory flows (Labanca, 2002; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2012; Bassi and Sirotti, 2010). The increasing presence on the Italian territory of migrants of African origin added to the Italian political choices of the last few decades and the lack of a public debate on the condition of Italy as a postcolonial country have encouraged the revival of colonial orientalism and racial stereotypes. This is reinforcing the dichotomies 'colonizer' versus 'colonized', 'us' against 'them' that are the symptoms of a country that has not come to terms with its colonial past. According to historian Del Boca, Italy still has a long way to go before reaching full acknowledgement and acceptance of atrocities committed and obligations not attended during the colonial experience (Bassi and Sirotti, 2010; Del Boca, 2003).

According to Connerton (1989) it is through performativity and commemorative ceremonies that we keep memory alive and are able to pass it down through repetition thus implying continuity with the past and "exercising cognitive control by providing the official version of the political structure" (Connerton, 1989, p. 50). While this theory explains what are the elements that constitute collective memory, academics wonder "How many students in compulsory schooling know that Italy used to be an imperialist power, and if so, on which territories it rules?"⁴ (Labanca, 2002, p. 464) and state "By and large, Italian history books pass over the colonial period. As a result, the latest generations of Italians have no knowledge of Italy's colonialist past. Strange as it may seem, few students today even know that Italy ever had an Empire. After the fascist period, Italians repressed awareness of the colonial past, deeming it a historical experience to be erased – especially since the loss of the colonies came in the course of the country's defeat during World War II." (Taddia, 2005, p. 210)

Taking all these elements into account I decided to explore the potential connection between the legacies of colonial history and the contemporary society-changing events in the perception of younger generations. The revival of racist behaviour, the lack of a structural policy for the integration of immigrants in the society, the restrictive law for acquisition of citizenship for second generation children, the generalized assumptions of Italy not being a postcolonial country compared to the UK and France are symptoms of unresolved business between the colonial history and the contemporary development of the Italian society in the globalized world. However, it cannot be assumed that other European countries have reached full acceptance of their postcolonial condition merely because this issue has gained greater visibility and is being overtly debated.

The youngsters' perspective on the contemporary society and the bond with the colonial history can be observed by focusing on the approach in the institutionally endorsed educational system, since it is in this framework that every single student on the Italian territory gets in touch with the topic of colonialism with the mediation of institutionally approved elements such as textbooks and teachers.

⁴ Free translation from the original Italian

I.2. Observation Context:

Memory passing down and education are elements undeniably entangled in the understanding of historical facts still related to events of the contemporary world. It is from these two keystones that my research has developed to look into the way in which young adults make sense of the colonial history in Italy. I focused on the institutional didactic approach choosing as a sample case one single high school institute of Northern Italy. While looking into the implications of history teaching, I took into account the possible existence of elements external to the school environment such as social agents like mainstream media and political discourses. They interact with the teenagers' understanding of reality on a daily basis and might convey information over the phenomenon as well. The study aims at delving into the legacies of the history of Italian occupation in Northern and Eastern Africa (Libya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea) along the 20th century.

The field work undertaken involved interviewing six teachers in charge of the history chair in six senior year classes of different specialisations since in the Italian education system the national guidelines for history teaching define that the twentieth-century is a subject to be faced during the last year of high school. The choice of relating to students of different curricula – namely information technology, foreign languages, sciences, social studies – allowed me to get a more inclusive picture of the teaching methods and whether the nature of the specialization could influence the notions under analysis.

First of all, I present a brief overview of the social and economic context in which the field work was carried out: the high school Institute *Primo Levi*. This secondary school hosts 440 students between the age of fourteen and nineteen who can choose among the four different curricula mentioned above. The institute is situated in Badia Polesine in the Veneto region in North-Eastern Italy, the town counts with 10.348⁵ inhabitants out of which 1.063⁶ are residents of foreign origin (ISTAT). This municipality is part of the administrative province of

⁵ ISTAT, Popolazione residente al 1° gennaio, <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=18549>, last visited 11/04/2019

⁶ ISTAT, Stranieri residenti al 1° gennaio, http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRRES1, last visited 11/04/2019

Rovigo that counts with the second least number of foreign residents (7,6%)⁷ on the regional average of 9,25%⁸, however, the Veneto region is ranked the fourth in Italy by number of foreign residents⁹ (ISTAT). The Veneto region is also one of the most wealthy regions, here the yearly average family income is slightly higher than the national average amount: 34.253¹⁰ euros per year in Veneto compared to 33.268 at national level (ISTAT).

Given the specificities of the environment where the field work was carried out and the very nature of the research as a case study, the results of this work are not intended to be generalized to other contexts and the observations that will arise are valid exclusively for this very set of circumstances and sample cases involved.

I.3. Method:

The idea of this research project is to analyse the youngsters' way of approaching the contemporary Italian social reality in view of the potential influence the knowledge or lack of knowledge of Italian colonial history might have. In so doing, this study focuses on how the teaching of colonialism enables this generation to make sense of the relevant changes the society is undergoing. The Italian society, in fact, has become part of the Europe-bound migration routes only in the recent past thus boosting the perception of the country having turned from a historically recognized source of emigration to a target land for European and extra-continental immigration. In this framework of recent changes, school plays a relevant role as an institution, in the creation of citizens fitted for facing the challenges a multicultural society might bring along. This study focuses on the connections the students create between

⁷ percentage extracted by ISTAT data, Stranieri residenti al 1° gennaio, http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRRES1, last visited 11/04/2019

⁸ percentage extracted by ISTAT data, Stranieri residenti al 1° gennaio, http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRRES1, last visited 11/04/2019

⁹ ISTAT, Stranieri residenti al 1° gennaio, http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCIS_POPSTRRES1, last visited 11/04/2019

¹⁰ ISTAT, Reddito medio annuale delle famiglie (in euro), <http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?QueryId=22919>, last visited 11/04/2019

the past colonial processes and the happenings that have led to the development of the contemporary society as we know it.

The research is based on the analysis of the educational methods of the teaching of the Italian colonial past, more specifically on the analysis of history textbooks for high school, class observation, interviews with teachers and focus groups with students.

I.3.1 Methodological Option:

During the field study I made use of three main methodological tools within the framework of qualitative approach: focus groups, semi-structured interviews and direct observation.

Qualitative methodologies were chosen in order to allow fluid interactions and observe the creation of the stream of thoughts, perceptions and points of view. Due to the very nature of the research itself it is fundamental to look beyond the mere notions learnt and taught about colonial history; the qualitative option “provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience” (Marvasti, 2004, p. 7). However, before engaging into focus groups, interviews and observations I focused on the analysis of the history textbooks in use in the classes that participated in the study. The features examined were: form (vocabulary), content and visual aid (maps, images, historical documents). Despite the advancements in pedagogy techniques and teaching tools, history is still one of those subjects that most rely upon the use of the textbook and classroom-taught lessons, therefore the contents they hold still have the power to convey meaning to a great amount of students whose civil awareness is still being shaped.

My history textbook analysis focused not only on the description of the happenings marking the development of the colonial process, but also on the outcomes both in the Italian environment and in the former colonies. Special attention was addressed to the vocabulary due to the great impact that language can have in conveying concepts. Visual support to the text such as the presence of pictures of the colonies, propaganda pamphlets and maps was also considered critical since such aids and the way in which they are presented can be relevant to the perception of historical facts by acting at a subconscious level; these same

elements were focus of my interest during the class observation. In addition to these features, I focused my attention on the absence of potentially controversial elements. Making explicit or eluding in-depth analysis of events, their causes and their outcomes can influence significantly the students' perception of historical phenomena in relationship to the development of society and politics until the present day. The whole history textbook examination process is represented by the grid of analysis I created and enclosed to this study (Appendix A).

Since my research project is hinged on the idea of perception of social phenomena linked to historical events, I decided to use the technique of field observation, interview and focus group with the aim of obtaining a more detailed idea of the perception of the colonial experience and its potential links to the present times.

What is particularly interesting about direct observation is that it is a method that allows the researcher to grasp every detail of the situation and its development. In the case of this specific study I employed this technique to infer the students' reaction to the topic, which questions the teaching of historical process solicits in the youngsters and the underlying significance conveyed by the teachers without the mediation of other means (Quivy and Campenhoudt, 2013). Through the practice of observation I gathered information from the students without directly intervening in their learning environment so as to obtain an idea of how they actually assimilate and interpret this historical connection with the present society and to verify the spectrum of elements underlined by each teacher. The fact that students and teachers had met me and interacted with me before getting together in the classroom for the observation of the lesson, allowed them to feel more at ease with me as an external element and granted me the chance to learn about their communication codes and relationships before performing the observation.

As far as the teachers' contribution to the research is concerned, I used the technique of semi-structured interview that, unlike the structured typology, "allow[ed] more fluid interaction between the researcher and the respondent. In this format, respondents are not forced to choose from a pre-designed range of answers; instead, they can elaborate on their statements and connect them with other matters of relevance." (Marvasti, 2004, p. 20). The interview was hinged on the importance bestowed upon history teaching within the

educational system, the methodology used during the class on Italian colonialism and the approach to the topic used by each teacher, in order to deepen the discourse to a more pedagogic level.

Interaction with the students was carried out through the tool of focus groups since it can "provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals" (Rabiee, 2004, p.656). The focus groups were carried out in two separate sessions, one before and one after the students attended the history class on the topic of Italian colonialism in Africa.

The sample cases for the focus groups did not have to apply to specific requirements as long as they were students of the senior year of high school in one of the classes under observation thus following the principle of "commonality, not diversity" (Sim, 1998, p.348) for selecting focus group participants. Sample subjects were involved in the research regardless of features such as age, sex, nationality or ethnicity and I worked with groups with a number of individuals between seven and eleven. I decided not to mingle the students but to work with each class group separately to take advantage of the upsides of former acquaintance, such as to "relate to each other's comments and [...] be more able to challenge one another" (Rabiee, 2004, p.656), to avoid embarrassment in participating and stating their opinions.

I.3.2 Research Design:

After having analyzed the history textbook pages on the colonial experience in Africa I carried out the first set of focus groups with samples of the six classes under study separately, the second set of focus groups was carried out after the students had attended the class on the topic of Italian occupation in Africa. Semi-structured interviews to the six teachers working with the classes involved in the research happened throughout the fieldwork study period regardless of whether the class debate had already taken place or not.

Besides being an "economical way of tapping the views of a number of people" (Sim, 1998, p.346), I believe the focus group technique better suited my research with teenagers

since it would allow them to feel less pressure due to the fact that inputs were not directed to them individually and, at the same time, to feel empowered by the group dynamic -since the students already knew each other and are faced with the experience of exposing themselves in front of the class mates daily-. In addition to this, the dynamic environment without the interference of the judging element of the teacher was supposed to boost spontaneity, freedom to express strong – even contradictory – opinions; in the words of Sim (1998) "the idea behind the focus group method is that group processes can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview". (Sim, 1998, p.346) Nevertheless, the power relations that exist within the group might have been exported into the focus groups.

Before engaging in the focus groups, upon presenting my project to the history teachers I made sure the student would receive exclusively general information over the topic of my research so that the response I would obtain would be spontaneous and unbiased. The students were told that they would participate in an informal activity over the topic of imperialism and colonization only. Whether or not the history of Italy and its colonial venture in Africa would come to their mind was one of the outcomes I was intending to obtain along with the potential connection still tangible in our society and the outcomes of colonization as a composite process.

The first focus group, in fact, was carried out before the pupils studied, in class and on their textbook, the history of Italian colonialism during the fascist regime, only after the class did the main topic of our exchange of thoughts turn more specifically to the history of Italian colonialism in Africa, their knowledge and ideas on the topic. In this framework two elements need to be taken into account: in the case of the students "the actual act of answering questions causes some respondents to either change the beliefs and attitudes that they held before being required to answer a particular question or generate views for the first time" (Foddy, 1993, p. 69), therefore it is possible that their response to the topic proposed had never been reflected upon before. In addition to this, as stated by Sim (1998), "it cannot be assumed that what a person says in a focus group is a predictor of what he or she may say in some other social situation" (Sim, 1998, p.349). Following this, I need to specify that the context in which the focus groups happened was informal - despite taking place within the school premises - because they were relating to an external person who would not have any

sort of impact on their school performance; what was being observed and recorded was not the knowledge they could prove to have but simply their ideas on a range of topics.

As far as interviews are concerned, I started off by asking teachers general questions related to their background, the role of history teaching in education and topics in the program of the senior year, these questions were used to establish a relationship with the interviewee and to start the interview generically in order to move towards more specific questions. I paid attention specifically to the distribution of questions so as to avoid the " 'priming' effect that modifies the interpretation of subsequent, more general questions about the topic " (Foddy, 1993, p.60) to sound consistent.

In spite of the ever-present risk of discrepancy between what the subjects answer and what they actually believe, misinterpretation of questions, or the possible inclination of the interviewees to answer what they think the researcher expects (Foddy, 1993), I decided to avoid the limitations of closed-ended questions. I opted instead for a semi-structured model since "there are no dilemmas over question wording and question sequence because the nature of the interview is conversational. Data thus emerge as a narrative and not in the form of ticks in pre-coded boxes" (Foddy, 1993, p 15). This choice was made owing to the fact that I reckoned fundamental the dialogue flexibility and the possibility for the subjects to move freely in the topic and its extensions.

I.4. Discussion and limitations:

I believe the greatest relevance of this study is to broaden the discussion over the Italian colonial experience that in Italy has emerged only recently, with sensible delay compared to the cultural decolonizing process taken up by the other European countries (for instance, while the postcolonial studies' masterpiece *Orientalism* was published in the UK in 1978 it was translated in Italian only in 1991, thirteen years later; the first book on the study of the Italian colonial history written by the independent researcher Giorgio Rochat was published in 1973). In addition to that, the specific contribution of this project is its link to the educational system. Sources over this topic are extremely limited: the academic articles I have found about the analysis of history manuals and their approach to colonialism date back to 2006 and 2010. Consequently, I believe that this project can be useful to take stock of the

situation by updating the historical analysis of textbook thanks to the new information of the manual under study currently in use. In addition to this, the innovative and potentially most relevant elements of my research is the inclusion in this study of the perspective of both sides of the educational system: students and teachers and the analysis of their perceptions.

Although this study might provide the foundation for other similar studies to be carried out on a more inclusive scale, its main limitation is that it is carried out at a local level involving a restricted number of teachers and students of one single schooling district.

Another limiting condition is that of time: history of Italian colonialism during the senior year is discussed in one lesson only and so the window of time for observation and interpretation of results is extremely limited being this field work activity the main core of the whole project. The amount of time for the observer to be in touch with teachers and students might make it harder for all the subjects to feel at ease and openly share viewpoints. Nevertheless, I do not consider this difficulty as a hindering factor for the validity of the project.

Being more specific, limitations related to interviews and class observations can be detected in the fact that both activities took place within a formal context since the teachers were interviewed and their work observed by an external person. My study involved being present during the execution of their work within the premises of institution that employs them, they were being inquired about the didactic techniques and their view over the Ministry guidelines for history teaching when invested of the role of competent personnel. In this framework it is fundamental to remember that "questions and answers should be understood in relation not only to one another but also to the social contexts in which they operate" (Foddy, 1993, p.11) and hence the behaviour of the subjects cannot be considered completely neutral and unbiased. In addition to this, the limitations of the interview as a tool itself have to be considered as in the words of Foddy, "the fact respondents answer a question is not, in itself, proof that the question has worked as the researcher intended it to work." (Foddy, 1993, p.52).

Talking about direct class observations, even though I did not intervene at all during the observation of the lesson, my presence might have influenced the teacher's performance, the content of the lesson or the interaction of the students. Nevertheless, I chose this method because it "gives you an idea of interaction and the interrelationships of social relations in a

group, and a sense of process which you cannot get in any other way." (Frankenberg, 1989, edited by Burgess p.75).

Turning to the focus groups, the presence of stronger and weaker elements complicates the understanding of everyone's opinion since while "Certain members of the group may be more assertive or articulate than others, and their views may come to dominate [...], those who remain relatively silent are falsely assumed to agree with the prevailing view. Hence, whilst silence may at times indicate agreement, it may also represent an unwillingness to dissent." (Sim, 1998, p.348) Besides this, the presence of an external element – In this case myself as the moderator – and the sample cases' awareness of our conversation being recorded, might have influenced their contribution. In addition to the difficulties the group dynamics create due to their very nature, the interpretation of non-verbal language can also be considered a potential obstacle since in a number of occasions disagreement was not overtly stated but could be detected solely by decoding body language of the subjects.

Lastly, according to Sim's view it is not to be forgotten that "the personality, social identity and interpersonal skills of the focus group moderator will influence powerfully the process of interaction" (Sim 1998 p. 347) and therefore, in my case I intend to point out my being a white researcher, interviewer and moderator as an element to take into consideration. Furthermore, being this study my first experience in fieldwork, it is important to take into account that my lack of familiarity with the environment might have influenced the accuracy in detecting more subtle aspects of the subjects' interactions.

I.5. Historical overview:

The Italian colonial experience in Africa follows the international expansion trend that characterized foreign policy of other European countries such as the UK, France and Belgium during the so-called "age of imperialism" (Calchi Novati, 1994). Along the nineteenth century, the interest of the European geographic societies towards the African continent had changed. Instead of explorers willing to collect information on territories and the diversity of peoples, these societies were sending armed guards opening the path for trade and resources exploitation, often using violence towards the indigenous populations (Del Boca, 1992).

In this framework the Italian expansion plan is considered and described as anachronistic due to its delay in implementing the colonial project compared to the other European powers. In fact, in the period in which the UK and France were working on the consolidation and stabilization of their colonial territories within the borders already established – in the pre-war period, namely from 1900 to 1915 according to Labanca (2002) – in recently united Italy, the idea of obtaining colonial possessions was just starting to take shape.

In order to better understand what led to this succession of events, it is fundamental to have a look at the Italian situation and its international relations since this phenomenon cannot be taken into account regardless of all that was happening in the system in which Italy was placed at a European and global level.

By the end of the nineteenth century Italy had become a united nation (in 1861, with the admission of Rome in 1870; Italy is declared unified only 23 years before the 1884 Berlin Conference) and intended to be acknowledged by the other European powers as a worthy and modern country. The means employed to gain recognition and "become free from its imprisonment in the Mediterranean"¹¹ (Mack Smith, 1997, p. 217) was territorial expansion, pushed by the interests of part of the conservative ruling class and geographical societies. This approach would allegedly strengthen the perception of Italy at the international level and widen internal consent. At the same time external elements allowed Italy to move towards this direction. It is in fact not to be underestimated the impact of peripheral factors in the outcome, such as the imbalance of power among the European countries, the presence of territories in Africa under no European influence and the openness of local chiefs on the coasts of the Red sea to trading agreements. Among the aforementioned external elements we can specify that the UK accepted carrying out joint expeditions with Italy in Northern and Eastern Africa, due to its harmless position at the international level. The UK could easily manage Italy being in control of neighbouring unoccupied areas of Africa rather than any other more threatening European power. This way Italy made its first step into the imperialist era beginning with trade concessions in Assab and Massaua under the watch of the UK and then formally establishing colonial rule in Eritrea on 1st January 1890 (Mack Smith, 1997). In

¹¹ Free translation from the original Italian

the Horn of Africa the main power was Ethiopia, and as such it soon became the main target of the Italian colonial project (Calchi Novati, 1994; Del Boca, 1992). However, since the neighbouring territories such as Eritrea and Somalia did not have a strong central administrative system, they were easier to manipulate; taking control of the coastal areas surrounding Ethiopia was intended to be the first step. Academics such as Calchi Novati (1994) state that the relationship of the Italian government with the colonial enterprise had been ambiguous from the beginnings, in fact the first step in Eritrea was made by acquiring concessions of territories through private trade companies such as *Rubattino* in 1885. Only later on did these private commercial acts escalate into government-endorsed military occupation. The institutions lacked the resolution to support this enterprise and preferred to take advantage of private companies as intermediaries at first (Calchi Novati, 1994).

Unlike in the case of other colonial powers, such as France, the expansion project was not encouraged by a united colonialist party pushing the country towards occupation of African territories. As a matter of fact a relevant number of Italian MPs was not in favour of this financially demanding undertaking in a country that still had lots of work to do both within its own fledgling borders and in the relationship with other European powers. Nevertheless, the nationalist factions – fostered by colonial associations – prevailed and the Italian intervention in Africa was presented to the parliament in terms of a set of commercial actions in order to have it approved. The groups in favour of the imperialist enterprise were: part of the conservatives justifying their interests with the 'demographic excess' issue, Catholic philanthropists and missionaries following the civilizing mission idea, geographical societies using the rhetoric of scientific exploration (Mack Smith, 1997). The first operations in the commercial bases did not meet local resistance since the ports of Assab and Massaua had historically been home to a number of foreign settlers due to the strategic trading position of the area; the Italian presence was not felt as a threat of invasion. The subsequent escalation to military occupation was legitimized by what President Crispi called 'demographic colonialism' ideally intending to avoid Italian emigration towards America in favour of the African colonies (Labanca, 2002).

Territorial expansion along the coast and towards the inland in the direction of Ethiopia were met by a number of difficulties such as lack of proper military strategy and coordination, ignorance related to the local geography and administrative structures in

addition to the overestimation of the abilities of the Italian army. All these elements led to catastrophic outcomes such as the 1887 Dogali battle. As stated by Labanca (2002) Italy and its government were not ready for the fractures within the ruling class and the military corps this set of decisions would involve.

After the military defeat in Dogali the Italian strategy changed attempting a diplomatic approach through the Treaty of Ucciali in 1889. The intention was that of imposing a protectorate over the Ethiopian territory, the treaty was signed but resulted in a fatal diplomatic incident. In fact, in the translation signed by Ras Menelik what Ethiopia was accepting was just a friendship agreement. According to Labanca (2002) African historians have considered the Treaty of Ucciali the shortcut that the last of the European colonial powers resorted to in order to overtake the only national territory in Africa that had resisted imperialism till then. The Italian misconduct was brought to the attention of the other European countries and the protectorate was never considered valid; Italy had failed in front of the international community and had once again underestimated the complexity of the Ethiopian ruling system. Since the diplomatic approach had failed, the Italian government decided to expand in Ethiopia with the use of force despite the worries of part of the ruling class on the potential negative repercussions. However, both the institutional and public opinion's opposition was not decisive enough to stop the war campaign promoting the subtraction of the Tigray region to Ethiopia in order to weaken the central government; this plan culminated in the Battle of Adwa in 1895. Against Italian predictions the indigenous resistance fighting back the Italian army was much more organized and had by far better knowledge of the territory. The Italian military chiefs would never take into consideration the possibility of an African military group actually being able to defeat a technologically advanced European one, and yet the Italian army was forced to retreat in failure in "the worst defeat of the whole scramble for Africa"¹² (Labanca, 2002, p. 82). Following this, President Crispi resigned and Italy lost credibility at international level in matter of military force and foreign politics.

Even if most of the happenings in the Horn of Africa were not reported to Italy, the Battle of Adwa was catastrophic to such an extent that the news reached the country; however, it was

¹² Free translation from the original Italian

reported as an ill-fated day and blamed it on the General Baratieri that supervised the military operations (Labanca, 2002). While the battle was lost due to poor political strategy – added to mediocre military performance – the ruling class committed to imperialism did not accept the blame. The idea that was perpetrated was that the Italian destiny in Adwa did not depend on the political dare, as journalist Indro Montanelli writes almost one century later: "the Italian imperialism lives in its deepest contradictions: Menelik ascends the imperial throne with Italian help, the very same Menelik defeats the Italian troops, irremediably, with weapons of Italian manufacture"¹³(Montanelli, 1979, p.48). According to Triulzi, the myth created around the defeat of Adwa calling for redemption, was the symptom of the "inevitable military misjudgment and poor colonial policies, couple with collective feelings of colonial guilt and national humiliation" (Triulzi, 2003, p.105)

The scandal of the Battle of Adwa struck the confidence of the colonialist society and made the rulers waver at the idea of keeping the colonial project alive. With the 1896 Peace Treaty of Addis Ababa, Italy renounced to the idea of any advancement in Ethiopian territory, yet the 'Adwa complex' would influence the development of the rest of the Italian colonial political strategy. Balancing out the colonial undertakings, while the rest of the European powers had strengthened their control over their colonies and maximized profits, Italy had only managed to occupy small Eritrea and fail a number of times in Ethiopia (Labanca, 2002). Despite its scarce success "what had started off as an 'accident' of the British politics had originated the autonomous Italian expansion policy"¹⁴(Labanca, 2002, p.69). However, after the Adwa defeat, the Italian colonial project slowed down the pace due to "deep contrasts within the newly born state over the 'colonial burden' " (Triulzi, 2003, p.95) and the internal discrepancies between the conservatives pro-occupation and the socialists running the slogan "for the colonial adventure we shall give neither a man nor a cent" (Triulzi, 2003, p.102). Despite its weak start and the faulty attempt to occupy Ethiopia, the Italian colonial venture did not end but moved along different more cautious paths: Italy was now aiming at Somalia in order to surround the Ethiopian territory and control the coasts.

¹³ Free translation from the original Italian

¹⁴ Free translation from the original Italian

What is nowadays known as Somalia, at the time, was constituted by autonomous nomadic groups organized in a non-centralized political structure divided in areas of influence among France, UK and Ethiopia. The occupation tactic was similar to the case of Eritrea: the first territories were acquired by means of private commercial protectorates under the watch of the British government. Italy effectively took over in 1905, yet the scarce natural resources, lack of infrastructure and fertile lands made this colony less appealing for Italians willing to settle down. It will be only during the fascist regime that a larger number of emigrants from Italy will move to Somalia where more land became available once expropriated from the local owners (Calchi Novati, 1994). Until the fascist period the colonial power in Somalia remained mostly indirect – run by the trading companies – and formal – with a scarce number of settlers. Almost no development plan was undertaken and the Italian occupation bore little influence in the social and political landscape, the role of Somalia was mostly strategic since after the catastrophic result of the Battle of Adwa the Italian government was not willing to invest large sums of money in the colonial project. With the formal recognition from Ethiopia of the Italian protectorate borders in 1908, Northern and Southern Somalia became officially a united colony (Mack Smith, 1997).

In the time span of ten years what had started off to be a harmless project of international relations stabilizations favouring the British presence in Eastern Africa had evolved into a territorial invasion the UK would no longer keep under its control. Even if the Italian colonial project had developed in this framework, academics such as Labanca (2002) and Del Boca (1992) underline the Italian ruling class' diplomatic strategy as the main determiner of the imperialist drive. The primary aim of prestige gaining was internally promoted as a will to develop a demographic colonialism model. The implementation of the expansion plan in the Horn of Africa was publicly justified by the 1880s and 1890s French foreign policy in Tunisia. While France formally took control of this portion of the Mediterranean coast, Italian politicians also claimed the Italian right to occupy the Tunisian territory due to geographical proximity and the presence of a significant Italian community. Once French authority was officially claimed and recognized, the Italian political rhetoric used this diplomatic incident as a justification to be entitled to invade other African territories instead.

Even though the territories officially under the Italian rule were extremely small compared to other European powers' possessions, obtaining sovereignty of these colonies

had changed the perception of Italy in the international realm and therefore its self-awareness, cultural and political life; Italy had shifted from the *Risorgimento* ideals into the imperialist era (Labanca, 2002). Once again, despite the differences in the development of the colonial strategy undertaken by Italy compared to other colonial powers, the elements common to the imperialist mentality and the modality of action, make the Italian experience fully fledged part of the European colonial and imperialist phenomenon.

With the turn of the century, Italy showed renewed economic interests and diplomatic confidence towards the colonial expansion. The undertaking had been strongly supported and patronized by the geographic societies that in 1906 received institutional recognition with the foundation of the Italian Colonial Institute in Rome. The sensibilization of the public opinion to the colonial discourse – often linked to the topic of Italian emigration to attract the proletariat – was a crucial challenge for the expansionist associations that insisted on the government keeping possibilities open both in the Mediterranean and in the Horn of Africa. As stated by Mack Smith "While elsewhere colonialism was motivated by exceeding capital, in Italy it mostly originated from misery and the illusion that it [colonialism] could represent a means for rapid enrichment" (Mack Smith, 1997, p.157) thus showing that potential for economic investment and diplomatic activity did exist. Even so, creating an ideology behind the mission of the Italian imperialist activity remained fundamental in order to involve the public opinion. Imperialism became the means through which Italy as a nation could have the chance to stand out among the other European countries. War power – following Crispi's approach in contradiction to Giolitti's diplomacy – and the predominance of the Europeans over local African populations became the tools towards this target (Labanca, 2002). Following this discourse and the rhetoric of the demographic colonialism, Italy started looking at Libya as the upcoming potential territory to be occupied. The propaganda carried on by the colonial associations and geographic societies describing Libya as a fertile land – perfect both for agriculture and international trade – underlined its strategic position in the Mediterranean. In addition to that, Libya was the only area under neither French nor British influence despite the weakness of the Ottoman empire currently ruling those regions. Allegedly, obtaining the control of this land would strengthen the image of Italy as a colonial power and provide for additional security in matter of international relations besides the

Triple Alliance agreement (Del Boca, 1992; Labanca, 2002). To president Giolitti's government – which had introduced some social measures dear to the socialists thus far – the occupation of Libya was the compromise with the conservatives' demands to give an impulse to the economy.

Under the great pressure of the Colonial Institute and part of the parliament, President Giolitti – breaking with his cautious diplomatic political approach – accepted to take action by invading Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911, despite the risks that the presence of the Ottoman empire, though weak, could bring to a war of that scale. The idea of Blitzkrieg was based on the assumption that local populations would accept Italian presence and that the troubled Ottoman empire would not fight back. Contrary to the expectations, the Libyan resistance was compact and often led by the Turks in an anti-Italian guerrilla. To bypass this situation Italy turned to an alternative diplomatic strategy: attacking the Ottoman empire at its core, the Balkans. At the same time position war in Libya developed into occupation war in the inland and it culminated in the signature of a Peace Treaty with the Ottoman Empire that, too invested on the European fronts, renounced the control of Libya.

After having employed a significant number of troops (including also units of askari¹⁵ from Eritrea) that made immoderate use of violence and reprisals, in November 1911 Cyrenaica and Tripolitania capitulated and the decree for annexation was signed (Labanca, 2002). Even if formally the two Libyan regions were under the Italian rule, the local resistance was strong and made large portions of Fezzan and Cyrenaica inland hard to subjugate, the power was maintained mostly through quisling local chiefs. Military intervention in Libya resulted in increase of the national pride and polarization within the political opposition. By 1914 Italy had reached its maximum expansion in Libya with enormous effort from the military forces. Actual control of the whole territory was not bound to last long due to the inability to stabilize control, neutralize resistance and the increasing need to recall troops to Italy due to the breakout of World War I. In 1915 the Italian rule lost ground and regressed to the 1911-1912 stage.

¹⁵ The askari were indigenous men from Eritrea and Somalia enlisted as soldiers in the Italian colonial troops fighting in Libya and the Horn of Africa. source: <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ascari/>

In order to keep up the spirit of the public opinion, the Italian radio and press stopped reporting negative news from Libya and focused exclusively on the happenings of WWI – strategy widely employed by all the imperialist powers when it comes to colonial wars. Unlike the initial expectations when embarking on the war in Libya, the control of this territory did not benefit Italian international power in any way during WWI, nor did Italy take advantage of its colonies as a source of manpower or natural resources – settlers and soldiers named Libya 'the sandbox'. All in all, the existence of colonies did not significantly benefit the Italian performance in WWI, nor did it strengthen the Italian position in the international balance of powers.

During the Peace Conference following the end of WWI it was France and the UK which took the main decisions leaving Italian demands on acquisition of further colonial territories out of the game, the Italian delegation had overestimated its position of power. The Versailles Peace Treaty was perceived as a mutilated victory colonial-wise, a myth that would persist throughout the decades (Mack Smith, 1997).

All elements considered, the Italian participation in the scramble of Africa had led to the strengthening of nationalism, the creation of the myth of the 'mutilated victory' and the 'Adwa complex'. At the same time this enterprise did not bring the international prestige expected by part of the conservative and catholic political factions interested in giving an impulse to the economy and impress the European powers with the enterprise in Africa (Mack Smith, 1997).

Even if the colonies were not the main concern for Italian politics between the two world wars, the expansionist ambitions in Ethiopia had not ceased existing, the project was newly attempted under the fascist rule since the previous liberal governments, according to the fascists, had showed inability to defend national colonial interests during the Versailles Peace Treaty conference. The contradictory and inefficient colonial strategy of the former governments divided on the topic – adding to the economic instability and the weakness of the League of Nations – opened a window to the fascist aggressive political approach to the colonial project and contributed to the wearing out of the European power balance (Labanca, 2002).

While the rest of the world was concentrated on the stabilization of international relations and maintenance of the *status quo*, the fascist Italian government put into action an aggressive strategy to subvert the balance of power. European countries were focusing on adjusting the relationships with their colonies where the liberation movements were becoming stronger; in this very framework Italy was still looking at territorial expansion as a measure to increase its power in Europe and to boost popular consent (Labanca, 2002). Until 1925 colonial politics had been addressed according to the measures enacted by the liberals, what changed over the years was that Africa escalated to be a priority for the government that turned to a more aggressive approach; back then the international observers had underestimated the resources the fascist regime was allocating to the colonial enterprise. Broadly speaking in all the Italian colonies in Africa the number of military troops was increased alongside institutionally fostered emigration in order to support the demographic matrix of the colonial enterprise – according to Calchi Novati (1994) in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica the number of Italian settlers doubled between 1936 and 1940.

While the liberal Italian government had been interested in occupation of African territories for the international status of the country, Mussolini's idea of the creation of an empire was based mostly on strategic interest per se, in addition to the consolidation of consent among the Italians (Labanca, 2002). The fascist approach was based on: systematic and generalized use of violence, belittling of the former liberal governments foreign policies, revisionism of the outcomes of Versailles Treaty, forcibly inculcated institutionalized propaganda on the Italian right to demographic-driven expansion, manipulation of the myth of the ancient Roman empire, intense use of media to transmit the ideology of the superiority of the white race over the black exotic and primitive populations of Africa, the coming together of regime and Church during the war of Ethiopia in declaring it a land of slavery, economic incentives in the colonies linking politics and economy.

Renewed interest in turning formal colonialism into actual occupation of the colonies led to implementing different measures. In Somalia the Italian military operations expanded North and towards the inland overthrowing tribe chiefs and disarming the local populations in favour of the Italian settlers. In Eritrea – stable since 1890 – the aim of the colonial project was to install a relationship of loyalty of the locals towards the Italians so as to take advantage of the strategic position of this territory and enlist its soldiers for the support of the Italian

expansion plan elsewhere. In order to do so, a sense of strong national unity was created fostering separation between Eritrea and Ethiopia that would have repercussions in their future relations (Labanca 2002, Calchi Novati 1994).

The diplomatic relations maintained hitherto in Libya through collaborative agreements with local rulers – especially in the more hostile environment of Cyrenaica – were interrupted in favour of the use of force to strengthen the control over territories that so far had been mostly only formally Italian. A number of extremely violent means were employed in order to break the Libyan resistance movements such as land expropriation, disarming of the locals, removal of masses of people and reclusion in concentration camps in order to break the relationships with local chiefs and the liberation movements, closing the border with Egypt to avoid rebel recruits and weapon supplies in. This resulted in one fourth of the population disappearing and the local economic and social structure to be shattered (Del Boca, 1992).

The invasion of Ethiopia started with small-scale events such as Italian occupation of the Somali inland in Ogaden, at the border with Ethiopia and the plan to build a railway linking Somalia and Eritrea passing through Ethiopia. The following pretext for Italian military intervention took place in 1934: Italy had invaded the border between Somalia and Ethiopia a number of times in order to increase the tension with Addis Ababa, the Italian attitude provoked the battle break out from the Ethiopian side allowing Italy to technically avoid being blamed for intervention (Mack Smith, 1997). The manipulation of the 1934 intervention added to the fear of the European liberal powers over the potential alliance between Italian fascist regime and nazi Germany, caused for no European country to overtly oppose to the Italian intervention. Even though Ethiopia summoned the League of Nation for action, the international balance of power was so unstable that the sanctions and agreements proposals of the League of Nation hardly had any influence on the Italian conduct. In order to maintain the *status quo* it was less dangerous to let Italy keep itself busy with the war in Ethiopia rather than risk turning it against the European powers. The Italian empire project had acquired higher priority. Mussolini's idea for the war in Ethiopia was to employ a large number of troops and weapons to conquer the territory in a very short period of time. Following the 1934 trespassing of the Southern border in the Ogaden region, Italian troops led by General Badoglio attacked also from Eritrea – the North-Eastern side – without official war declaration. General Graziani's troops followed by invading from Somalia (Calchi Novati,

1994). The Ethiopian guerrilla strategy – hinged on knowledge of the territory – was not adequate to fight the large number of soldiers and technological weapons, including poisonous gas – even though it had been banned in 1925 Geneva Convention – and atrocious retaliation against the civil population – especially students and the clergy who could foster development and change in the country (Rochat, 2005). These means led to complete annihilation of the enemy, not only its wearing out. Mussolini was personally involved in a number of direct decisions regarding the war. Volunteer supporters of the regime - 'black shirts' - were sent to Africa. The year 1936 was a turning point in favour of Italy with the battles of Amba Aradam and Mai-Ceu that forced the Negus Haile Selassie to flee to London; after seven months, on 5th of May 1936, the Italian troops took over the capital city Addis Ababa. From that moment the territory was divided in regions not following the lines of tribal division of populations to enact the principle of *divide et impera* (Calchi Novati, 1994; Labanca, 2002).

The Ethiopian war, though brief, in addition to causing an enormous number of casualties also among Ethiopian civilians, had a huge military, logistic and financial cost for Italy and it put the country at risk diplomacy-wise, raising protest at international level for the barbarous means of destruction used. Yet, the fact that European powers such as the UK had not taken action to hinder Italy intervention in Ethiopia enabled Italy to overthrow the Ethiopian government. The end of the war of conquest in Ethiopia was declared on 5th May 1936 during a public speech where Mussolini proclaimed the Italian Eastern Africa empire (AOI) and underlined the success of Italy despite 'unjust sanctions' of the League of Nations. The war in Ethiopia obtained great popular consent in Italy, it was propagandised as the war that would give Italy its long-awaited empire following in the footsteps of its Roman past and would revenge the wrongdoings of the Battle of Adwa and the mutilated victory of the Treaty of Versailles (Del Boca, 1992; Labanca, 2002).

The Ethiopian war had isolated Italy from the international community – Germany was then the only potential ally left – it had weakened its prestige and slowed down the rearmament for WWII. Despite all investments and effort to control the territories, the fascist colonial empire would always remain only a military occupation and, evidently enough, Mussolini was more interested in facade victory rather than actual valorisation and employment of colonial resources (Mack Smith, 1997).

The non-stop propaganda around the greatness of the Italian empire and the hard work of the colonial administration in Ethiopia aroused interest and enthusiasm around those same overseas possessions that had lost popular support especially after the Adwa defeat. Governmental incentives and the insistence of the means of communication sensibly boosted Italian emigration towards Libya and the Horn of Africa. A pivotal role in the advertising of the “war made in the name of progress and civilization”¹⁶ (Criscenti, 2005, p.301) was that of the cinematographic institute *Istituto LUCE*¹⁷ whose images and movies propagandised merciful Italians towards the African populations, schools, roads, food distributions.

What the means of communication were not broadcasting in Italy were the terrible conditions in which Ethiopia was actually being ruled: there was almost no image of war or dead people – and if there were, the dead were not Ethiopian –, no trace of the massacres or chemical weapons (Criscenti, 2005). Even if these images were not showing it, what was really going on in the colonies was monuments being taken down, burning of villages and crops, internment camps were being used as a way to subjugate the local population and deter resistance movements from fighting against the occupation, racial laws were introduced in 1937 creating segregation and turning mixed-race families illegal. At the administration level, the Italians ostracized the minority elite Amhari and substituted the local chiefs with Italian residents, control of all the areas was maintained by the so-called ‘colonial police’ made up of Italian army corps or indigenous militia (usually from Eritrea) sent to every corner of the country to fight the resistance movements which were trying to keep the social and political traditions alive among the population. One of the peak happenings showing the repression carried out by the Italians was the massacre of Debra Libanos monastery where at least 500 people – mostly from the religious elite – were murdered as a reprisal for the attempt to General Graziani's life in 1937 (Del Boca, 1992; Rochat, 2005).

Due to the lack of information of what life was actually like in the colonies, the fascist repression of the freedom of expression and the suppression of all dissidents, no proper anti-

¹⁶ Free Translation from the Original italian

¹⁷ Cinematographic institute funded in 1924 in order to spread the fascist propaganda among the population through documentaries, cinema and newsreels http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/istituto-nazionale-l-u-c-e_%28Enciclopedia-del-Cinema%29/

colonial movement was able to develop in Italy where the rhetoric was embedded of fascist mythology and the cult of the *Duce* (Labanca, 2002).

The situation in Ethiopia slightly improved when Amedeo Di Savoia substituted General Graziani as viceroy of AOI (Italian Eastern Africa): some investment for infrastructure was put into action and exiliated aristocrats were allowed back in the country. Nevertheless, the local resistance was never completely silenced therefore all along, the Italian presence in Ethiopia was never peaceful and the Italians were never seen as the good-hearted civilizers. (Labanca, 2002)

In Libya the situation was more stable, concentration camps were closed and, although limited, some funds managed to be actually invested in infrastructures – such as a road connecting Libya to Tunisia and Egypt, churches, mosques, schools –, and the local governor General Italo Balbo pushed to include Libya to be legally considered as national territory. Clearly enough this project was not accepted by the racist fascist administration that only made lukewarm amendments to the racial legislations and granted citizenship exclusively to the Libyans who fought alongside the Italian army to occupy AOI (Labanca, 2002).

Once WWII broke out, the colonies were mostly abandoned. Italy did not have either the military or economic resources to appropriately support the African territories and little by little it started losing power. In 1941 Haile Selassie returned to Ethiopia supported by the international community preaching the right of self-determination of peoples. The local resistance partnered up with the neighbouring British army gaining new strength until, in the same year, the British troops took control of all the regions of the Italian Eastern Africa. By mid 1943 the allies entered Libya, this event marked the end of the Italian colonial experience. In this frantic picture many *coloni* – Italian settlers – fled back to Italy while those who remained or were stuck in Africa lost most of their privileges and richness.

Despite the numerous faults in the colonial project, Italy did not give up easily on its 'place in the sun', in fact between 1945 and the year 1947 in which the Paris Peace Treaties were signed – formally depriving Italy of its colonial possessions – the national rhetoric insisted on claiming the right over the pre-fascist colonies; Italy ended up being entitled to the ten-year long Trusteeship in Somalia – 1950-1960 – (Calchi Novati, 1994).

Colonization and decolonization created new dynamics but did not make a *tabula rasa* in these areas of North and Eastern Africa. For instance, Ethiopia came out almost untouched culturally speaking but its power in the Horn of Africa was unsettled, Italian occupation forced the unification and division of peoples mixing up the pre-colonial ethnic configurations. From a political point of view what is most outstanding in the influence of the Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa is that 'Italian colonialism objectively transmitted to the Horn of Africa a poisoned heritage: the fate of Eritrea and the delimitation of the border between Somalia and Ethiopia with the dispute over the Ogaden' (Calchi Novati, 1994, p.103)

I.6. Closing remarks:

Before delving into the postcolonial condition of contemporary Italy it is important to understand what are the historical elements that have led to the creation of what Labanca calls the "contradictions of the memory" (Labanca, 2002, p.8) that exist between the historical happenings of the past and what has survived to this day of the colonial experience – fascist popular songs, colony-inspired toponymy, myth of the good-hearted Italians. As mentioned above, the idea of the Italian experience in Africa being different has been fostered by the comparison with the colonial history of other European powers such as France and the UK. The Italian experience was, in fact, shorter in terms of time, more limited in terms of geographical areas involved and economical advantage obtained, it did not produce large immigration flows from the former colonies and did not cease due to the increasing pressure of anti-colonialist movements of the autochthonous society but by the decision of the European powers in 1947 during the Paris Peace Conference after the end of WWII. Even though profound differences did exist, the Italian colonial experience unfolded following patterns and principles similar to the European imperialist project. The historical development of the Italian colonialism discredits the theories carried on by regime-sympathising and imperialist politicians, historians, intellectuals of the Italian colonialism being different and merciful. In fact, the most controversial happenings and the similarity to the 'other colonialisms' was long silenced both in historiography, arts and media following in the aftermath of WWII (Del Boca, 2003; Ponzanesi, 2005; Labanca, 2002). This "systemic and scrupulous defence of the colonial past" (Del Boca, 1992, p.VII) and the removal of colonial

crimes by institutions and media, contributed to distorting the idea of the Italian intervention in Africa and of Africa itself by fostering stereotypes and myths. The difficult relationship of the left-wing postwar ruling class with the fascist past led to complete suppression of the colonial debate since this discourse would stir up internal divisions linked to the fascist regime while the Republic was trying to create a renewed united Italy by "eliminat[ing] from its memory everything which could separate individuals" (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 392 quoted by Connerton, 1989, p. 38)

Not facing the debates had – and still has – a range of repercussions on the Italian contemporary society in the survival of nationalist myths. An example of this is journalist Indro Montanelli in his 1979 collection of books on the history of Italy when he describes the national public opinion's "indignation for the rigour of prosperous nations which, having become what they are also thanks to numerous colonial conquering and robberies, showed to be intransigent and moralist only towards proletarian Italy"¹⁸ (Montanelli, 1979, p. 242). This attitude of self-victimization – even among intellectuals – in relation to the 1947 hetero-determination of the end of the Italian colonial empire, has fuelled the rooting of these myths. The same happened for the idea of the Italian colonizers having been good-hearted, merciful and genuinely interested in the well-being of the African populations, a myth strongly supported by arts and media such as the abovementioned *Istituto Luce* and colonial literature (Criscenti, 2005; Triulzi, 2014). The ministry of foreign affairs contributed to perpetrating myths by underlining the merits of colonial experience and by avoiding to punish those responsible for the crimes. This allowed legitimization and self-absolution in the public opinion (Del Boca, 1992; Labanca, 2002).

¹⁸ Free translation from the original Italian

Chapter II:

Official and popular colonial memory in the past and in the present

II.1. Collective memory and systemic forgetfulness; a theoretical overview:

"There are types of structural forgetting which are specific to the culture of modernity" (Connerton, 2009, p.2), it is from this standpoint that the whole reflection over the topic of the Italian social memory related to the colonialist experience will be analysed within the framework of this study. The historical, political and social context in which the colonial project took place are in fact keystone to the understanding of the development of collective memory and debate over this topic. Modernity, as intended by Connerton (2009), is linked to the phenomena of capitalism, globalization and disgregation of previously fixed social hierarchies; in this context of change, 'forgetting' has become a feature of modern society. It is in this environment that the late 1800s and early 1900s European imperialist project unfolded and the collective memory linked to it has developed first and has been removed then. Even though some types of structural forgetting are specific of the culture of modernity and hence inherent in the contemporary social structure, processes and temporalities, in the case of Italy, political elites and institutions have fuelled amnesia of the colonial past and here "amnesia is not the same as forgetting; amnesia is memory repressed and dulled" (Petrusewicz, 2004, p.270).

A general conflicting trend is to be found in contemporary societies when it comes to the connection with their historical past. The politics of nostalgia express a general fear to lose communal memory and national self-definition rooted in the past; at the same time these very societies are obsessed by the idea of future seen "as the 'cause' of current experience and action" (Beck, 1992, p. 34 in Connerton, 2009, p. 5).

Collective memory and politics become interconnected when institutions make use of images of the past in order to legitimate the present social order since it is the recollection of the familiar past that paves the way for the development of new models of experience made intelligible by the already existing context (Connerton, 1989).

According to Connerton (2009), memory is eroded by structural transformation and hence all the core changes the twentieth century has brought along – the advent of capitalism, the technological revolution, changes in the social hierarchies – contributed to weakening the stability of collective memory and upsetting the relationship with the past (Connerton 2009).

The impact of media and technology is not to be underestimated in the context of transmission of historic collective memory. In fact the quickening of communication methods has led to news and information overload resulting in impairing one's ability to make clean cut connections between past and present events. This revolution of the media has been triggering the process of "cultural discarding" (Connerton, 2009, p. 79).

According to Connerton (2009) memory is dependent on references of stability that evoke elements of recollection. Creating a link between people and space. Places, real or imagined, are in fact fundamental to preserve images that sustain connections of the memory. In fact "acts of memory are envisaged as taking place on a human scale" (Connerton, 2009, p. 5), while a major source of forgetting is associated with "processes that separate social life from locality and from human dimensions" (Connerton, 2009, p.5).

When talking about the memory of colonialism in Italy and its link to spaces, the notion of what Connerton (2009) calls 'memorial places' comes into play. Memorials such as monuments are powerful examples of places that have a social function related to historical memory. Nevertheless they can be often considered "semantically opaque" (Connerton, 2009, p. 10) meaning difficult to interpret in their social function, deprived of their original significance due to the fact that they are the symbol of historical events hardly ever comprehensible or re-traceable by those who stand in their presence. A contradiction can be detected when it comes to the creation of memorial spaces, the intent behind it and the result. The very action of building memorials, despite aiming at forestalling collective amnesia, frees the individuals from the obligation of actively remembering, thus boosting both memory and forgetting (Connerton, 2009, p.29). When building monuments, an

interpretative lens is applied; this focus on specific aspects of the historical events might lead to a potential passing down of mystified memories. Historian Del Boca (1992) in his book *L'Africa nella coscienza degli Italiani* pinpoints Connerton's theory to the Italian reality with the following example: "Vittorio Bottego, for instance, is still considered one of the purest heroes while [...] it should be classified as a criminal and adventurer of the worst kind. Yet, there is not a single Italian city that did not name a street or square after him¹⁹" (Del Boca, 1992, p. 114). Following this statement, it can be said that another "semantically opaque" (Connerton, 2009, p. 10) colonial memorial element in Italy is toponymy: names of colonial battles and the so-called war heroes permeate the Italian urban spaces and yet, rather than icons of historical memory, they seem to represent accurately selected elements introduced in the urban space to pass down only one side of the historical implications related to them. An example are the streets named after Vittorio Bottego, the statues erected to protagonists of the colonial war such as Rodolfo Graziani; these memorial places are devised to exalt them as heroic figures, but at the same time this approach buries the criminal side of their actions. When it comes to education the most relevant historical figures are named, but they usually bear little significance in the chronological event-based succinct narration. During my research I observed that General Graziani – one of the most emblematic and debated figures of the colonial period – is named once in the textbook along with Badoglio as military leaders responsible for the use of chemical weapons. Out of the four history lessons that I observed General Graziani was mentioned only in one case in connection to topic of the memory of the crimes but in no focus group did the students name either him or other military chiefs. Among the students, the names that emerged as pivotal actors in the colonial phenomenon were that of the Prime Ministers Crispi, Giolitti and Mussolini; other figures mentioned were poets D'Annunzio and Pascoli who supported the colonial intervention. Talking about toponymy and its lack of historically detectable significance in favour of the celebrative side of power, an example is to be found in the myth of Adwa explained by Chelati Dirar (2017): "Adwa is a name that re-evokes contrasting emotions in Italy, in Ethiopia, in Africa and in the rest of the world. Pride, humiliation, solidarity, vengeance, division. But how many Adwa exist? In almost every Italian city there is a street named after Adwa. [...] And yet, how many Italians

¹⁹ Free translation from the original Italian

have full awareness of the meaning of this name and of its importance in Italian history?" (Chelati Dirar, 2017, p.555). The myth, as in the case of Adwa, keeps bearing meaning despite the modern era obsession of breaking with the past, yet "the more radical the rejection of anything that came before, the greater the dependence on the past" (Connerton, 1989, p. 61).

II.2. The role of institutions in the Italian collective memory of the colonial experience in Africa:

History teaching and collective memory are two subjects deeply entangled due to the fact that our perception of the present is rooted in the knowledge of the past and, as such, it affects one's understanding and interpretation of social phenomena. According to sociologist Connerton (1998, 2009), the role of the institutions in transmitting it is critical.

Before delving into the specificities regarding historic and cultural memory and the development of the processes of forgetting in the Italian educational background, it is important to underline the historical institutional approach to the topic of Italian occupation in Africa and the role of the post-war ruling class in triggering this loop of historical blackout.

What is crucial to consider here, is the strong link between the colonial experience and the fascist regime. The postwar governments that attempted to remove fascist ideals and lead the country towards democracy created a historical black hole over the whole fascist period. Since it was during this same epoch that Italy reinforced the idea of a colonial empire, the African experience was deleted along with the other unpleasant features the dictatorship had left behind (Del Boca, 2003). The political centre and left-wing ruling class, leading the country after the second World War did not boost the development of a postcolonial debate. Representatives of the main republican parties ruling after the collapse of the regime (Christian Democracy, Italian Liberal Party, Italian Socialist Party) aimed at appeasing internal divisions in order to favour the reconstruction of the nation and its values. Despite the existing difference in the political ideals of the above mentioned parties at the government and opposition, exponents of all of them resulted to be in favour of Italian involvement in Africa after the collapse of the fascist dictatorship, supported by elites with colonial interests both

in Italy and in the former colonies. Once the Italian sovereignty in Eastern and Northern Africa was officially denied during the 1947 Paris Peace Conference, the political institutions started concealing the topic of the Italian presence in Africa. On one hand it had been a failure of the Italian diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference and, on the other hand – being the topic undeniably interwoven with the still open wounds of fascism – it would have brought about internal disputes (Labanca, 2002; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2015).

The lack of postcolonial awareness, the impossibility to access historical archives and the reluctance to dismantle nationalist myths resulted in the absence of the colonial topic in the public debate. When it was mentioned, the discourse was usually a revival of the colonial rhetoric that had dominated the country during the fascist period. Historian Del Boca (2003) is one of the main exponents of the theory that the non-intervention of institutions facing the decolonization process had repercussion on the Italian contemporary society and on the way in which the image of the colonial experience of the country was and is still conveyed. With the lack of debate questioning the myths of the fascist times, the Italians were driven into a mere reshaping of pre-established ideals that are still present in the Italian society .

Del Boca (2003) and Hiribarren (2017) underline the responsibility of the more conservative political elites involved in the government in hindering both academic and public access to the reports from the Italian occupation in Africa. In fact, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established right after the end of the regime was composed mainly by the former Ministries of Colonies who had all sorts of reasons to neglect the wrongdoings happened under their direct rule. Therefore, historical archives were made inaccessible to scholars and entrusted to a Committee composed of people previously belonging to colonialist association. Due to the difficulty in accessing the original sources, research in the field was strongly discouraged till the seventies²⁰. In order to elude public interest in the topic of the Italian colonialism, once all the colonies had been removed from the Italian control, the media avoided mentioning the former colonies and the difficulties of the decolonization process in those territories making it easier for the public opinion to forget about the Italian responsibilities in Libya and the Horn of Africa. In so doing, the Italian population slowly

²⁰ The publication of "*Il colonialismo Italiano*" by Giorgio Rochat in 1973 was a turning point in the study of the Italian colonialism.

stopped feeling involved in the struggles of the newly independent African states (Labanca, 2002). This way the ruling parties were able to mislead attention over an eighty-year-long phase of Italian history. The lack of debate on a national level about the legacy of colonialism and the silence regarding the events following the independence of former colonies created a knowledge gap that was being filled in from the seventies on, mostly in the academic environment without managing to reach the public opinion (Del Boca, 2003).

Even if the postwar republican government had political ideals far from the fascist ones, on the matter of the colonies it was decided to follow a continuity approach with the previous governments by advancing demands of control over African territories. All this led to a contradictory political position since these same politicians preaching democratic left-wing anti-fascist ideals were fighting in favour of Italian involvement in Africa (Del Boca, 1992; Labanca, 2002; Calchi Novati, 1994). Following this contradictory behaviour is the fact that Italy lost its colonies in 1947 but the Italian Ministry of Africa was not suppressed until 1953. In 1952 the committee for documentation of colonial activities in Africa was created and was entrusted by the government with the documentation collected along the years of colonial occupation in Africa (Hiribarren, 2017). This committee was supposed to publish documentation regarding the Italian presence in Africa during the years of colonialism – as the other European powers were doing at the time – but this did not happen. The Committee – composed of former associates of expansionist circles and colonial administration clerks, holding the monopoly of the colonial documentation until 1984 – made available a relatively little part of the existing documents with no scientific rigour. The apologetic aim of this approach was that of building a positive image of the Italian colonial rule in Africa. As a consequence, the topic, whose sources were so hard to analyze, never gained attractiveness for scholars who were this way indirectly discouraged. This choice not only made archives inaccessible to independent researchers isolating the historical colonial studies, but also supported a nostalgic and sectoral approach keeping the possibility for a proper postcolonial debate from happening (Hiribarren, 2017).

In addition to the obstacles found by the historians in accessing archives at times displaced or whose original classification had been altered (Hiribarren, 2017), it is also fundamental to focus on the public opinion and the way in which the history of colonialism permeated to the population.

The propaganda supporting the Italian intervention in Africa was already present before the fascist regime took over and it had a significant impact on the public opinion especially upon embarking on the conquest of Libya after the Adwa defeat. The rhetoric of the Italian right to expand and the demographic need to obtain more fertile land were ideals that the Colonial Institute in 1906 and the Ministry of Colonies intended to root in the Italian conscience (Labanca, 2002). In addition to this, the orientalism-driven ideas describing Africa as the exotic continent inhabited by savage populations and hypersexualised women that had been circulating in Europe during the 19th century had been internalised in Italy too (Coppola, and Sonia, 2012).

Nevertheless the fascist regime managed to take propaganda to the next level making use of all possible means in order to inculcate myths supporting the Italian intervention. Since part of the population was not educated, propaganda in newspapers and magazines did not manage to reach all strata of the population; in this context, cinema, photography and ethnographic exhibitions came into play (Lombardi-Diop 2012).

Mussolini's strategy aggressively underlined the role of Italy at the centre of the Mediterranean and the need to militarily expand in the name of the proletarian country, emphasising the feeling of great change and cutting with the past. In 1926 the colonial day was instituted in order to spread the colonialist awareness through rituals and public manifestations. The colonial discourse carried on by the propaganda was hinged on the victimistic view of the League of Nations hindering Italy in its rightful desire to colonize, and on the ancient Roman mythological symbols fostering the idea of a revival of the greatness and power of Italy as an empire. The colonial quest during the fascist period also reinforced the stereotypical view of the African continent and its inhabitants in order to build the image of the enemy first and of the overruled population then. Old myths were redirected for colonial purpose to adapt to political needs (Ponzanesi, 2012). White Catholic advanced Italy was supposed to help the gullible and uncivilized Africans develop and the barbarous savages and perfidious Arabs to be tamed – because impossible to assimilate. The propaganda focusing on the Italian 'adventure' in Africa and its great enterprises managed to distract the population from internal problems and WWI tragedies also providing a gateway to adventure

and freedom through the myth of the border²¹. Italy was closed in itself where every aspect of life was controlled by the State and the Church; the idea of freedom and fortune in Africa was, for a change, very attractive.

With the collapse of the fascist regime – which coincided with the end of WWII and the dismantling of the Italian colonial empire – republican anti-fascist figures came to power within the framework of the National Liberation Committee first, and democratic moderate parties later. In this period of profound social and political changes the Italian democratic government created new republican structures but maintained a policy of continuity as far as institutional system and international relations were concerned.

By adopting a strategy of continuity, the government and the influential political elites avoided questioning and revising the role and legacy of certain institutions such as the Ministry of Eastern Africa. The apologetic attitude towards the institutes that used to be active in the field of colonialism led to impunity of the military heads of the colonial occupation. This was the case for General Graziani and General Badoglio who were guilty of war crimes committed in the colonies – such as civil population massacres and use of chemical weapons, among others – who underwent superficial trials held in a slow and ineffective punishment environment. "There is no doubt that the difficult international situation in which the country found itself rendered arduous the possibility of bringing to justice those responsible for war crimes. The left clashed with the resistance of the moderate and conservative block as well as the objective needs to protect national interests" (Focardi and Klinkhammer, 2004, p.343). The trials ended in none of the major fascist criminals being condemned for colonial crimes or even accused of actions taken in the framework of colonial politics "and the war criminals – Generals Badoglio, Roatta, Graziani and 1200 other – are now on their way to becoming cherished heroes rehabilitated by 'revisionist' historians" (Petrusewicz, 2004, p.269). In so doing the post-war governments covered the crimes committed in Africa under the fascist rule perpetuating the myth of a benevolent

²¹ Even though the Italian colonial literature does not count with an extensive number of works by Italian writers, the European literature set in exotic contexts (such as Kipling's) influenced the Italian literary landscape. The most iconic example of exotic literature in Italy is that of Emilio Salgari (1863-1911) who set his novels in Asia. However, he never had the chance to actually set foot in the places he described in his books, thus suffering of and fuelling the myth of the border (Labanca, 2002; Ponzanesi, 200).

colonization. Italy did not put its colonial past under trial; action was never taken despite the demands advanced by Addis Ababa. In addition to the Italian choice not to face the outcomes of the colonial occupation, a role was played also by the allies who did not punish Italy for its colonial crimes. In fact, the other European powers did not want Italy to turn against them since it had become one of the strongest leftist countries in Europe and the internal resistance movements that had fought alongside the allies had been fundamental in order to demolish the fascist regime (Labanca, 2002).

Since the major colonial criminals had received no punishment and had not been taken to trial, why would the Italians that had been involved in the African campaigns – or even who had just supported the regime expansion – blame themselves? Self-absolution and removal came as the natural consequences and thus decolonization seemed to have happened. In a 1946 survey less than 18% of the population felt the loss of colonies as a severe national mutilation proving that the fascination for Africa that the fascist government had imposed did not have strong enough roots. All these elements together avoided triggering the debate that had been happening in the other European colonialist countries thus keeping alive the colonialist rhetoric (Labanca, 2002, p.438) added to the ineptitude of institutions to come to terms with the colonial experience – President Scalfaro attended moral obligation to condemn Italian occupation of Ethiopia just in 1997. Since the "control of society's memory largely conditions the hierarchy of power" (Connerton, 1989, p.1) it remains in the political institution interest not to publicly face the postcolonial debate.

II.3. History teaching and the passing down of collective memory:

Public education – in the specificity of history teaching – mirrors the image a country wants to display of itself. It is therefore possible to detect a relationship between the education policies and the political address of the country from the way in which Italy has been dealing with the study of its fascist and colonial past in the last decades (De Michele, 2006). History teaching serves not only the purpose of getting students in touch with past events but also that of empowering youngsters who are developing their critical consciousness and civic awareness by transmitting ideals that will turn them into fully fledged citizens. In fact, the personal growth of the younger generation is dependent on the socio-

cultural context in which they are brought up. Institutions – such as school –, symbols, social organization all become part of the personality of the youngster who develops according to the myth of centrality of the tradition and history of the social group they belong to (Schutz, 1970). For this reason the very nature of the contents conveyed in history teaching is highly dependent on the socio-political context surrounding the educational institutions, making the teaching of history very susceptible to politicization in order to justify political structures and redefine collective national memory (Araújo, 2013).

According to Cajani (2014) and the interviews held with the *Primo Levi* Institute history teachers, in Italy the subject of history is still regarded as teaching of 'national' history where the notion of nation and Europe are central to the development of events that are mostly analysed from one single perspective and therefore support a dichotomous approach to history. The flaws that can be detected in a one-dimensional approach are the passing down of concealed implications such as passivity of the peripheral actors, reinforcing the existent of mental binary opposing categories without revealing underlying power relations in international phenomena. This approach implies conceiving globally relevant processes as having appeared at one point in one specific geographical area and then spread lacking the wider picture of interconnectedness of historical happenings. Transmitting the approach where one portion of the historical development is envisaged as the standard model to which the rest compares tends to reinforce binary categories that need to attain to Western ideological evaluation parameters (Araújo and Maeso, 2010, p.242).

When scrutinizing the role of history textbooks, it is important to remember that by reproducing specific official narratives – as they are accepted and disseminated on an institutional level by the Ministry of Education, textbooks themselves come to create standards of truth accepted by the younger generations. By implementing this approach, the political ruling class exerts its control on the contents taught thus maintaining the *status quo* through the tool of education to the point that "avoiding an in-depth reflexion over the relationship between power and the production of knowledge [can become] a core element of history teaching" ²²(Araújo M. and Maeso S., 2013, 162).

²² Free translation from the original Portuguese

In the words of Italian scholars Leoni and Tappi, history teaching is “an extraordinary example of public use of the past” (Leoni and Tappi, 2010, p.154). This statement underlines the power and sensitivity of education as tool to foster youngsters' civil awareness as much as for the educational institution shaping future citizens. In fact, teaching can be seen as “a sphere of homogenization as much one of social transformation”²³ (Araújo and Maeso, 2013, 154). These statements can be applied to the context envisaged by Durkheim (1956) in which school substitutes other agents of moral education. Since schooling essentially represents a social function, the state must be involved in it in so far as it defines which are the shared principles and ideals to be taught. "The authority of those values is to come from the core foundational values of the society itself, to be outside and above teachers" (Yates, 1999, p.168).

The concept of postcolonialism linked to the Italian experience is still a widely debated theme, scholars like Angelo del Boca (2003) state that Italy has not come to terms with its colonial past yet. This lack of debate after the dissolution of the colonial empire has led to decades of disorientation in facing the topic often silenced at an institutional level driving the masses into burying an eighty-year long involvement in the colonial experience.

As a consequence academic literature over the topic has remained scarce until the seventies when critical analysis of the events finally started to become relevant among historians. Until this very day, literature over the memory of colonial history in Italy highlights numerous flaws in its representation in the popular culture such as in cinema and novels (O'Healy, 2012; Triulzi, 2014) and a lack of comprehensive critical analysis in the main tool for history teaching: the textbook.

Before digging into the representations of the Italian colonial experience in history textbooks it is important to take a glance at the context in which the choice of textbook itself takes place. It is, in fact, fundamental to take into account the relationship that exists between publishing houses, school teachers and the Ministry of Education.

²³ Free translation from the original Portuguese

In the case of the schooling institute where I based my research, all six teachers interviewed agreed on the fact that the history textbook is still a fundamental tool in the teaching environment – unfortunately, according to some of them –, while

"using a selection of different manuals and original sources as starting points for the students to trace back to the historical events would be the ideal approach instead"²⁴

(teacher A, February, 2019).

Talking about the choice of the textbook, a delegation of teachers in each schooling district is in charge of selecting one to be used in the institute, yet the textbooks present on the publishing market need to comply to the ministry guidelines regarding the teaching programme issued at national level so as students can be prepared for the national exams. Owing to this, the narrative is uniformed in most editions and the choice based on the ability to summarise the content, on the exercises provided and the available and appealing digital tools since

"all the manuals tell the truth, the narration is similar"²⁵

(teacher A, February, 2019).

During the field study I interviewed history teachers about the national guidelines from the Ministry of Education and more specifically stating as follows: "By the end of the schooling experience the student [...] will be able to conceive history as a significative dimension so as to understand the roots of the present times through critical discussion and debate among a range of perspectives and interpretations"²⁶. It then goes on to add among the objectives "to enable the acquisition of awareness of the problems that mark the

²⁴ Free translation from the original Italian

²⁵ Free translation from the original Italian

²⁶ Free translation from the National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education p.17

contemporary times through knowledge of the past and a critical reflection over it.”²⁷. These guidelines bestow great importance upon the relationship between past events and contemporary reality reinforcing the theory of the link between education and collective memory transmission. Despite the fact that all the interviewed teachers consider this objective the main aim of history teaching it is perceived as ambitious since only a few students whose personal interests are directed to the study of history or follow the current happenings in the news actually manage to engage and reach awareness of the past-present connection.

The national guidelines also state that “it is necessary to provide a suitable space for the topics of citizenship and republican constitution”²⁸ in order to develop the “competence necessary for an active and responsible civil life”²⁹. The importance of the development of critical sensibility and unbiased approach to the past appears to be central to the national guidelines, however the teachers interviewed find almost impossible to provide activities to students complying both these core objectives of the teaching. The difficulty is provided by the scarce amount of school hours available for the history chair – two hour per week per class –, it partly depends on the background education of the teachers themselves and on whether students receive notions of law while studying other subjects – such as in the law or philosophy chair. Once again – according to the teachers – the will to internalize is also dependent on the students themselves.

II.4. The memory of Italian colonial history in the textbook:

Given that history textbook can be considered bearers and transmitters of collective memory, the debated topics they contain – such as the fascist regime and the colonial period

²⁷ Free translation from the National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education p.17

²⁸ Free translation from the National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education p.17

²⁹ Free translation from the National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education p.17

– can reflect values and ideals dear to the political environment surrounding the world of education.

Researchers De Michele (2006), Tappi and Leoni (2010) studied the way in which the colonial experience has been represented in history textbooks in different decades after the second world war. What is most noticeable, as far as content is concerned, is the heterogeneity in the presentation of historical events.

During the post-war period, just until the beginning of the seventies, the main aspects of the colonial rhetoric endured, even if the regime was no longer praised. The myths of the good-hearted Italians and the positive impact of intervention on the colonies were maintained. All this prompted to pass on nationalist myths and a racialized worldview to a generation whose national identity was still being created and restored after the fascist experience. The institutions' main objective in history teaching was that of overcoming the traumas of war and dictatorship so as to educate the new generations to the principles of freedom and democracy by means of burying the memory of fascism and the colonial experience. As a result, this lack of debate and historical revisionism during the crucial years of reconstruction deprived generations of the chance to critically get a grasp of the recent past of their country (De Michele, 2006; Leoni and Tappi, 2010).

In history textbooks two different approaches were embraced: the soothing of controversial subjects through mystifications aimed at legitimizing all aspects of the colonial rule – be it the image of the tolerant Italian colonizer, the demographic drive for expansion or the civilizing mission in favour of the African peoples – or, as an alternative, avoiding reference of fascist experience whatsoever. Within this approach there was no room for critical analysis.

In the seventies thanks to advancement in historiography research and greater accessibility to archives, debate started to catch on. However, the challenge was to enable academic critical analysis to permeate society to a wider level. Even if the first steps were finally being made by erasing the propagandistic tones and by providing actual historical information about the drive for prestige that pushed the Crispi's, Giolitti's and Mussolini's governments into undertaking the colonialist expansion, eurocentrism still permeated the discourse about colonial rule (De Michele, 2006; Leoni and Tappi, 2010).

Another aspect taken into consideration by researchers De Michele (2006), Leoni and Tappi (2010) in their articles is that in the last thirty years the European colonial phenomenon as a whole has gained greater relevance in the history teaching environment in Italy. Especially from the nineties on, we can see a change in the way in which the authors approach the narration of the events. In fact, the pages dedicated to the colonial history start to feature topics hitherto eluded such as the use of chemical weapons and massacres committed in the colonies. However, this cluster of notions arranged chronologically does not manage to transmit significance in a context of interpretation in the logic of causality. Subsequently this approach lacks to raise awareness of the historical relevance of those events in terms of legacy.

According to researcher De Michele (2006), Araújo and Maeso (2010), in the educational system the importance of teaching history is regarded as one of the most powerful sources for the creation of a collective national identity. History textbooks become relevant in their function of content bearers since they are the last step of a long chain of compromise among power relations balance, ideals promotion, unbiased worldview shaping and diversity respect . For this very reason authors of manuals – along with teachers – carry great responsibility in shaping the foundations of the critical spirit and cultural baggage of the youngsters.

During my fieldwork I observed different elements in the history textbook in use by the classes involved in my study³⁰. I analysed the pages narrating the Italian colonial expansion in Libya and the Horn of Africa both at the end of the nineteenth century and during the fascist regime. The topic is discussed in broad terms, describing extensively the main diplomatic and military episodes. The information is basic: dates, name and places. The focus is directed to the colonial activity under the fascist rule. In addition to these seven paragraphs – four regarding the pre-fascist colonial activity (on pages 11, 80, 81) and three regarding the aggression of Ethiopia under Mussolini (on pages 306, 307, 308) – one extra appendix page can be found clarifying the modern day relations between Italy and Libya keeping the historical colonial connections in sight (p. 82).

³⁰ Brancati, Antonio and Trebi Pagliarani. *Dialogo con la storia e l'attualità 3. L'età contemporanea*, La Nuova Italia, 2012.

The historiographic advancements made by academics have definitely had their impact on educational literature, in fact the brutal treatment to local populations, the use of poisonous gases and the violent retaliations are overtly stated in the textbooks. However, a narrow, Eurocentric, view still pervades the narrative. No mention of the socio-political frameworks present in Africa before colonization nor hint to what the African countries underwent once Italy withdrew from those territories are to be found.

Except for the appendix explaining the current socio-political situation in Libya – which, according to the interviews, more often than not, the teachers have no time to delve into – the Horn of Africa appears as a powerless passive subject, deprived of political, economic or social structure. Even though it is stated that Ethiopia was part of the League of Nations when it was attacked by the Italian fascist regime, the narration lacks depth. I detected the absence of references to the diplomatic incident related to the translation of the Ucciali Treaty -the askari soldiers are never named except for one picture that names them in the caption- nor the incident that led to the beginning of the war between Italy and Ethiopia³¹. Leaving out the local populations' activity when discussing European colonialism "erases and banalizes the histories of collective struggles and questions of political responsibility – for instance, the enduring [...] anti-colonial/liberation struggles versus the narratives of White humanist abolitionism and independences granted in due time – drawing on the idea of the immaturity of the colonized for immediate emancipation/liberation" (Araújo and Maeso, 2015, p.3). These "formulas of silence" (Trouillot, 1995, in Araújo and Maeso, 2015, p. 3) can be detected also in the Italian school environment which – as Leoni and Tappi (2010) state – hardly ever allows the African population into the mainstream narrative “with the exception of a couple of pictures of the battle of Adwa made by Ethiopian painters” (Leoni and Tappi, 2010, p.166).

³¹ In 1934 Italian troops were guarding the Ual-Ual oasis in the Ogaden region at the border between the Somali and Ethiopian territory even though Italian control of this area had not been agreed upon. The presence of Italian soldiers in that area was considered border trespassing by the Ethiopian military corps and led to armed fight. This conflict breakout had been provoked by the Italian army in order to have an excuse to hold Ethiopia responsible for the beginning of the fight and to feel entitled to occupy the border starting the war (Calchi Novati, 1994).

The analysed textbook also fails to address the racial legislation implemented by the Italian colonial administration, or debate the myths of the exceptionality of Italian colonialism and of the *Italiani brava gente*³². These dynamics are briefly mentioned exclusively in the 'extra contents' appendix page (p. 82).

During the first focus group with students, when asked to brainstorm over the topic of imperialism and colonialism most of the students answered to these inputs talking about France, the UK, India and Africa. Only in two, out of the six, focus groups did students name Italy when asked to brainstorm over the concept of imperialism and colonialism. The fact that the manual – and as a consequence the teachers in class – approaches Italian colonialism detached from the foreign policies implemented before WWI and during the fascist rule, allows to interpret its impacts as marginal to global history. This also fosters the idea that we can conceive history as the 'history of each nation', as if it was possible to understand history individually rather than as interconnected in all their aspects. In history books, currently in use, European colonialism is described within a socio-economic framework, while the Italian experience, being presented as a phenomenon driven by political interests – the rhetoric of the demographic colonialism, international prestige without considering economic profits – avoids the comparison with the global socio-economic environment. This approach might hinder the students' understanding of the relation with other international processes and limits its reading by conveying the idea that Italy did not take part into 'that kind' of colonialism (De Michele, 2006; Leoni and Tappi, 2010). This is to say that even though the colonialist violence is no longer concealed in the public discourse and in the school environment, colonialism is still approached "as that 'annoying fly' that interrupts the state's 'forgetting machine', driven by what needs to be remembered, celebrated or commemorated" (Araújo and Maeso, 2015, p.3). This approach suggests that this regretful parenthesis of history is part of the past and we no longer need to come to terms with it since, just like the fascist era is over, so is the colonialist view.

³² 'Good-hearted Italians'

One more fundamental aspect that needs to be taken into account is the fact that language conveys meaning and so authors of manuals and teachers must be aware of the fact that the old rhetorics of paternalism and victimism can be internalised by the students also through the vocabulary used to describe the 'colonial adventure' – a term used both by teachers and in the school manual (pages 11 and 306). The word 'adventure' has a positive acceptation bringing to one's mind a "risky yet attractive enterprise full of fascination for the presence of unknown and unexpected elements"³³ fostering the idea of the conquered African territories as exotic and mysterious, and the colonial occupation as an example of Italian bravery.

The Eurocentric narrative is present in the omission of details related to happenings as stated above, but also in the language used to describe them; for instance when talking about the outburst of the provoked conflict between Italy and Ethiopia in Ogaden along the Somali border. The Italian army had been goading the Ethiopian on the border in 1935, the manual states "On 3rd October 1935 the *Duce* took advantage of the Ethiopian militia attacking an Italian garrison to open hostilities"³⁴ (p. 307). The idea of superiority can be conveyed via the use of some linguistic items over others: in the example above, the Ethiopian army, is defined as *bande etiopiche*, meaning militia or armed group, the manual does not use the word army even if Ethiopia was as a matter of facts a state with its own legislative system and of course its own state-organized army. Even though the authors write in the manual that Ethiopia was an independent state part of the League of Nations, the choice made was that of writing 'Ethiopian militia' rather than army. In Italian the word *banda*, that can here be translated as militia, not only implies that this is a non-organized group of volunteer guerrilla fighters, but it also brings a negative nuance. The word '*banda*' is in fact associated also to the meaning of 'gang', a group of people committing criminal activities. Why did the authors choose to call the Italian fighting groups army and the Ethiopians *bande*?

The presence or lack of images and maps also has a strong impact on the implications of content interiorization by the students. The textbook analyzed features a couple of fascist propaganda pamphlets paying tribute to the greatness of Italy and the militarization of the

³³ Free Translation from the original Italian, <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/avventura>

³⁴ Free Translation from the original Italian

colonial enterprise, and three photographs: one depicting a group of askari from Eritrea after the defeat of Adwa, one reporting atrocities committed in Addis Ababa during the fascist occupation and the third is a picture of Muammar Gaddafi shaking hands with Berlusconi. A map of the territories occupied by the Italian army in Libya and in the Horn of Africa is present and during all the direct observations in class the teachers called the students' attention to it. Nevertheless, during the second set of focus groups, when asked to talk about what the students knew of those countries that used to be Italian colonies, not all the students had a clear idea of where in Africa these countries are located.

In conclusion, even though history textbooks are creating more inclusive narratives and report the cruelty of Italian occupation, there are still aspects worth questioning in order to efficiently challenge the Eurocentric view that accounts for main discourse. It is not by adding appendices that the core narratives will be put into question (Araújo and Maeso, 2010), but by rephrasing the whole discourse – and the very foundations of Europe – in a critical multicentric category-free model. Besides this, the whole telling of Italian colonialist experience is still confined to a few scarce paragraphs. Little significance of decades of history can be conveyed in a couple of pages; no matter how strongly condemned, a brief list of dates and events treated as a footnote of the twentieth-century history have only, if such, a modest impact on the students' understanding of Italian colonialism.

II.5. Historic memory and Italian colonialism in class:

As a starting point I decided to ask all the teachers interviewed what is, according to them, the role of history as a school subject. They all expressed the idea that it is a subject fundamental for the development of the social consciousness of the students who are citizens in the making. Teacher F stated that by teaching history she is providing the students with tools that will enable them to make aware social decisions. Teacher D focused instead on the relationship with everyday events, according to him teaching history serves the purpose of

"bringing to life dimensions of the past that would remain still, just a cult, instead"³⁵

(teacher D, Feb, 2019).

A more critical approach is brought to light by teacher A who states that

"everyday when I watch the news I realise that we are dealing with a deficit: citizenship deficit, historical culture deficit, an awareness deficit, and this leads to disasters"³⁶

(teacher A, Feb, 2019).

Part of the criticism is directed to herself as a history teacher and at the educational system in general when she wonders whether all the years spent teaching have somehow been fruitful to the youngsters' understanding of reality. Focusing our attention on the topic of historical deficit and the role of memory in our society, teacher A speaks her mind about the role of collective memory in relation to the students:

"I have to tell the truth, and I'm saying this with amazement, it seems like the pupils have never studied history before. Even if the contents are the same studied in primary and middle school, it seems like they have never heard of it except for a few topics [...] it seems like as if they are facing something completely unknown. Hardly ever there are one or two pupils who are more aware and give a feedback, and this leaves me really puzzled, clearly enough the power of the human mind to make a *tabula rasa* is really strong"³⁷

(teacher A, Feb, 2019).

When talking about collective memory in connection with history teaching, it is fundamental to take into account the fact that the educational system is only one of the numerous inputs the youngsters are exposed to daily and the general context necessarily affects the perception of history. The modern-day capitalist society – characterised by social

³⁵ Free translation from the original Italian

³⁶ Free translation from the original Italian

³⁷ Free translation from the original Italian

change and continuous discarding – impacts collective and cultural memory through a number of aspects such as the scale of human settlement, the production of speed and destruction of built environment encouraging the phenomenon of cultural amnesia (Connerton, 2009). In addition to this, the role of history teaching was defined above as one of the inputs also because of its temporal marginality in the everyday life of the youngsters. All the groups involved in my study, regardless of the curricula, study history as a subject only two hours per week, which, according to the teachers interviewed, does not leave enough room for the thorough development of the programme and even less allows teachers to take the time for in-depth analysis of specific topics among which, in many cases, the Italian colonial history is to be found.

Focusing more specifically on addressing the Italian colonial history in Africa in class, the direct observations allowed us to identify three modes of approaching the phenomenon.

The first, a balanced approach, presented and described the main historical events by following closely the textbook structure, content and exercises. In this framework the teacher discussed the history of the Italian intervention in Africa within the context of the state foreign policy strategy. The succession of events was outlined, the major protagonists from the Italian side were named and then, the main focus was directed at underlining the phenomena of the biased propaganda and militarization of the colonial discourse. The violent aspect of the colonial enterprise was overtly stated – e.g. referring the brutality of the Italian occupation in Ethiopia – yet, the topic of Italian colonialism as a whole was presented as a marginal event within the fascist period and no explicit relation to the present-day society was mentioned.

A second critical approach, more detached from the textbook, was carried out by teachers who focused not only on the historical happenings that characterized the development of the Italian colonial experience, but also strongly underlined the dramatic consequences the occupied territories underwent and condemned the modalities of occupation. The element of internal consent was also highlighted as a motive for colonial war. This second approach was characterised also by the link created to present-day phenomena with the goal of discrediting the mystified 'good-hearted Italian' rhetoric.

Within this second approach the teachers talked about the racist feature of the colonial occupation in connection to the patronizing discourse surrounding the civilizing mission of the empire and the

"perception that some lands, just because they are not the richest places on Earth, they are all desert inhabited by savages"³⁸

(teacher A, Feb, 2019).

In this framework, no room is left for interpretation when it comes to historical revisionism and a revival of fascist ideals linked to biased memory of the colonial experience and widespread difficulty in admitting the historical violations of rights. The teachers whose class can be categorized within this second more critical approach made clear connections between the colonial fascist past and present-day social and political dynamics. To make practical examples of the long-lasting debate on the topic of Italian colonialism in the public realm, these teachers talked about the institutional and media struggle to admit the violation of human rights in the former colonies such as in the incident of the return of the Obelisk of Axum and naming Indro Montanelli as one of the public figures who long denied brutalities in Ethiopia. The current revival of fascist and colonial myths and rhetoric was also discussed bringing as an example the 2012 erection of the memorial to Rodolfo Graziani as a heroic figure and the still ongoing debate over the racist nature of the empire:

"textbooks present the topic of racial laws as if they were introduced due to Hitler. *Casa Pound*³⁹ states that the only mistake Mussolini made was that of allying with Hitler, while racism was running in Mussolini's vein since the very first speeches"⁴⁰

(teacher D, Feb, 2019).

³⁸ Free translation from the original Italian

³⁹ Far-right-wing Italian political party

⁴⁰ Free translation from the original Italian

All in all, this second approach adds a number of elements to the brief report of the manual and leads the students to rethink the

"fairy tale of colonialism that supposedly brought progress and well-being"⁴¹

(teacher A, Feb, 2019)

to Libya and the Horn of Africa.

The third approach detected, that we can name as indulgent, showed more indulgence towards the Italian intervention in Africa: the military aggression did exist, the poisonous gases were used, the Italian conduct did not follow the dispositions of the League of Nations, the colonization aimed at paving the way towards national profits and the propaganda did show just the positive side of the regime; even so the colonialist myths are – though unwillingly? – promoted. The idea of the civilizing mission towards the inferior African peoples as a genuine motive persisted by comparing the concept of European powers obtaining Trusteeships in Africa to a tutor who behaves unfairly towards a child, and again in the expressions

"Ethiopia was a backward territory"⁴²

(teacher B, Feb, 2019).

The positive impact of the infrastructures in Africa was also underlined by stating

"Italy tried to take infrastructures there" (teacher B, Feb, 2019) and again "Mussolini built roads and a cinema, many Italians go to Ethiopia to build what was missing"⁴³

(teacher B, Feb, 2019).

⁴¹ Free translation from the original Italian

⁴² Free translation from the original Italian

⁴³ Free translation from the original Italian

The racist nature of the fascist regime was presented as a

"double interpretation. Without the Alliance with Nazi Germany would these laws exist anyways?"

(teacher B, Feb, 2019).

The discrepancy among the ways in which different teachers faced the same topic – some of them more interested in creating links with the present, some of them more in tune with a general opinion which has not undergone the process of decolonization of the minds – shows that there is not a singular approach the topic inside educational institutions. The textbook – point of reference for the teachers – does not take a strong position and therefore the decision rests with the teacher who, as an element of society, could be more or less exposed to biased colonialist rhetoric. In addition to this, the Italian education system establishes History and Italian Language chairs to be taught by the same teacher who must hold a Masters degree in either History or Italian language and Literature⁴⁴. As a consequence, not all the teachers feel specifically competent in the field of history teaching if their educational background is linguistic. Therefore, the teachers of history who do not have a historic studies background tend to attain to the existing textbooks and perhaps a few external materials and documents. This system might lead to a less engaged and efficient history teaching method that shapes the perception of the collective past for the younger generations.

II.6. Italian colonial history and memory, the students' viewpoint:

The first set of focus groups took place before the students had faced the topic of Italian colonialism during the fascist time in class with the teacher. The inputs for discussion

⁴⁴ According to Ministerial Decree DM 259/2017 it is possible to teach history in high school also for people who hold a Masters degree in Linguistic or Literary subjects as long as their study plan includes either two annual history classes or four biannual history classes. Source: <https://www.miur.gov.it/-/d-m-n-259-del-9-maggio-2017>, Allegato A, Code A-12

in this first set were, in fact, related more broadly to nineteenth and twentieth century colonialism and imperialism. All along the focus groups sessions, when asked to freely brainstorm to get out spontaneous associations over the topic of colonialism and imperialism, just three out of six classes mentioned Italy. At an unconscious level, when asked to talk about this topic, in half of the classes involved in the study, the concept of Italy related to colonialism did not emerge. In two of the classes where Italy was named, students talked about what they had studied the previous year when the history of the Italian intervention in Libya had been discussed. In the third class, one single subject had knowledge of processes related to the Italian presence in Africa from sources external to school, while other students said

“I didn’t know the Horn of Africa even existed until five minutes ago”⁴⁵

(group D, February, 2019).

Even when they mentioned Italy, the students stated they had just a vague idea of the Italian history in Africa before the fascist period

“because Italy never had such great history of colonialism”⁴⁶

(group F, February, 2019).

Broadly speaking, the whole conversation on imperialism and colonies was automatically related to the extra-Italian European context with constant reference to India and the UK, France and Northern Africa, but also Germany and Belgium, economic interest in the colonies to obtain raw materials and cheap labour force, civil war for independence: all elements not strongly relevant to the Italian context, thus showing how the Italian colonial experience is not assimilated to that of the rest of Europe.

⁴⁵ Free translation from the original Italian

⁴⁶ Free translation from the original Italian

During the second focus group the topic of Italian occupation in Africa became central to the inputs the groups discussed; the starting point of the debate involved the basic notions students had about this historical phenomenon, geography involved, historical personalities, how the events unwound. Even though the aim was not that of determining to which extent the students possessed content information on the topic, the fact that in a number of cases students showed difficulty in placing historical events in space and time implies the little relevance this topic is given in the educational process and in the public discourse. When asked where they had gained the knowledge over the Italian colonial past they expressed during the debate, all the classes stated that they mostly knew about these events from school, some of them had heard stories from grandparents and others said that the word colonialism can be heard in tv or in the internet when talking about migration but they cannot recall this connection being made in the framework of the Italian experience in Africa. During the focus groups the students stated their minds regarding the reason why in the public realm the issue is not faced, it is because it can be perceived as

"failure, unlike the British that actually obtained something, here they [the Italians] only lost, they just did it [colonize] because the others were doing it too"⁴⁷

(group A, February, 2019).

Other students supported one subject's theory according to which this topic is not faced because it does not represent a merit

"just like in Germany the concentration camps are not something to be proud of"⁴⁸

(group A, February, 2019).

⁴⁷ Free translation from the original Italian

⁴⁸ Free translation from the original Italian

This statement is an example of the victimization that the phenomenon of colonial period can be left unquestioned because limited in time, space and followingly consequence; the negative acceptation makes it unworthy of debate. As stated above, the perception that the colonial phenomenon – having a limited relevance compared to the colonial experience of other European powers – also entailed unremarkable outcomes in the colonies and in Italy, was detected in the school environment through the focus groups.

The students found it hard to discuss the topics of the legacy of colonialism both in the former colonies and in Italy. While the study of the colonial phenomenon in the extra-national context had provided the students with some hints on what the consequences of colonialism might have been in the African countries, the general reaction to the question 'what do you think was left in Italy of the colonial experience?' was that of perplexity. The Eurocentric way in which the topic of colonialism – both Italian and foreign – had been faced was palpable in the silence and lack of preparation to this input since the students were never faced with the possibility that the colonial process could have had impact on the side of the so-called 'colonizer'. In general, the subjects detected as possible consequences political instability since they hear that in some of these countries there are armed conflicts, economic dependence on Europe, difficult institutional relationship, resentment towards Italy, no sensible improvement in the economic situation of the colonies since the Italians ruled

"for too short a period of time to leave something positive, you can see people arriving in Europe who speak English or French but not Italian"⁴⁹

(group C, February, 2019).

At a linguistic, cultural or architectonic level nothing was mentioned, most of them started the debate by saying that they were making suppositions because they didn't know anything of the current situation of these countries; "forgetfulness of colonality in both Western Philosophy and contemporary social theory' – is, therefore, a key characteristic of Eurocentrism" (Maldonado-Torres, 2004, in Araújo and Maeso, 2015, p. 3).

⁴⁹ Free translation from the original Italian

Talking about the detected relationship between the students' debate during the focus groups and the teaching approach of the teachers in class, we can say that the feedback was only partially conclusive, in fact a number of elements interfere with the teaching approach. The personal background of the students, for instance, has proved to be particularly relevant in the framework of historical shared memory: students who had no previous knowledge of the colonial processes stated that they learnt about the colonial phenomenon only in school because it is not a topic discussed at home,

"it depends on the interests of each family, I don't talk about colonialism or history with my parents" (group A, February, 2019).

Other students, whose families had been directly involved in the colonial process – such as grandparents who had moved to the colonies for work for a period of time – or who spoke of the fascist period at home, tended to express their minds about these topics more strongly accordingly to the family opinion despite the teaching approach used in class.

What was observed was that both the indulgent and critical approach tended to have an influence on the students' opinions. In fact, in the case of the indulgent approach, in a few cases students felt entitled to overtly state misconceptions over the colonial phenomenon since they were repeating the notions heard in class. The critical approach, on the other hand, sparked questions and curiosity during the following focus group debate. Nevertheless, despite the significant difference in the teachers' approach, a lot of other elements influence the internalization of the message. The hours spent learning about the colonial phenomenon were one or two over the whole school year for all the students in question; this leaves no room to take the topic to further considerations. In addition to this, the lessons are mostly based on the description of events of the textbook which, once the lesson is over, becomes the only reference students' self-study.

What is left of the colonial conscience in the contemporary society, the field work shows, are elements of the popular culture appropriated by the propaganda and the

colonialist culture. Eighteen-year-olds naming songs and slogans – *faccetta nera*⁵⁰, 'a place in the sun'⁵¹, *libro e moschetto fascista perfetto*⁵², postcards of soldiers in exotic contexts – is a signal of propagation of myths at a deeper level. Africa is still perceived as a whole entity, deprived of its internal differences and specificities: students name "Africa" in the same context as they name "France, India, the UK" and they refer to Africa as a country not as a diverse continent. According to the teachers, even if the approach to Italian colonialism is not exceptionalistic as it used to be in the past, in the public realm mystified elements can still be found especially through the myth of the 'good-hearted Italians'. Even if information on this period of the Italian history can be found, it is not a topic the students can get in touch easily outside the school environment.

Conflicting versions of the history of Italian colonialism are passed down through survival of rhetoric and omissions in the institutionally-endorsed education leading to mystification of the historic memory since "society tends to eliminate from its memory everything which could separate individuals" (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 392 in by Connerton, 1989, p.38).

⁵⁰ *Faccetta nera* (literally 'little black face') was a popular fascist song about the occupation of Ethiopia that praised white superiority and boosted the myth of slavery being a common practice in Abyssinia (Treccani, p.4 http://www.treccani.it/export/sites/default/scuola/lezioni/storia/ITALIA_FASCISTA_lezione.pdf).

⁵¹ Expression used under the fascist regime to talk about the Italian possessions in Africa.

⁵² Fascist slogan meaning that the perfect fascist possesses a musket and a book, implying that school and military training were the basis of the fascist education.

Chapter III:

Colonialism as an identity-defining element

III.1. Italian national identity, the colonial history as a defining element:

Upon discussing the topic of colonial history concerning collective memory, academics have highlighted the role of post-war institutions (Del Boca, 1992; Del Boca, 2003; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005). While the topic of colonial history was left out of the public discourse the issue of national identity had become crucial by the end of World War II. However, it was hardly treated in relation to the Overseas experience. One of the main reasons for embarking on the colonial enterprise in the 1880s was the yearning for international prestige and visibility in Europe, a continent where countries with a well-rooted nation-state tradition detained the greatest power⁵³. Italy, on the other hand, had become a united state only a

⁵³ Colonial historians and postcolonial academics, both Italians and foreign, have underlined the link between the colonial venture and the political intention to strengthen the feeling of belonging to the Italian nation that had recently been declared united when the diplomatic and military strategy for the occupation of Massaua were put into action. The Italian identity itself did not have as strong an appeal to the masses as the regional identity did. The colonial experience supported the strengthening of the national feeling of belonging mostly through the means of schooling, media and the arts. Among the academics that support this idea there are Del Boca, Labanca, Calchi Novati, Triulzi, Zullo, Dau Novelli, Lombardi-Diop, Ponzanesi, Mellino, Fuller, Ben-Ghiat. The debate about Italy as a nation and the creation of identity and the feeling of belonging exists not only in relation to the colonialist phenomenon. Historians, philosophers and researchers of different fields have been discussing this topic, some examples are Christian Raimo (*Contro l'identità Italiana*, 2019), Eugenio Di Rienzo (*Storia d'Italia e identità Nazionale. Dalla Grande Guerra alla Repubblica*, 2006), Ernesto Galli Della Loggia (*L'identità Italiana*, 1998), Eugenio Di Rienzo (*L'identità Italiana come problema storiografico*, 2011), Manlio Graziano (*Italia senza nazione? Geopolitica di una identità difficile*, 2007). According to these academics, after the official unification of Italy, many contradictions emerged in relation to the topic of national identity. In fact, politicians were not dealing with a homogenous group of people but with peoples with different cultures and languages, there was a sensible economic and technological advancement gap between Northern and Southern regions, political projects lacked consistency, stability and popular investment, the Church had played a significant political role for centuries in the Italian territory, and most of all, the Italian unification had emerged from elitist political interests rather than a reflection of popular will. The 1900s political nationalist project was supported by historians who wrote about the history of Italy according to the standards of the other great European nations. When facing the changes introduced by the twentieth-century globalization phenomenon, Italian politicians turned to the old patriotic rhetoric of nationalism rather than deconstructing the myths behind the colonial, fascist and racist discourse. While in the postwar period politics needed to focus on reuniting a divided national community, nowadays what needs to be built is an international community beyond borders and myths, if the Italian society is to accept its new multicultural nature.

couple of decades earlier – in 1861 – in the atmosphere of *Risorgimento* preaching the ideals of freedom, unity, and independence, "and alongside unity and independence new horizons were opening, the most challenging of which was that of turning Italy into a nation, namely making the Italians"⁵⁴ (Del Boca, 2005, p. 16). The collective awareness necessary to create a modern national identity did not automatically follow political changes; creating cohesion among the very diversified and long autonomous Italian regions has been one of the main objectives of all governments since the unification. Undeniably, the colonial process too is to be considered among the tool exploited to boost homogenization and feeling of belonging to a single national community. The constitution of an actual national Italian community depended on the development of a political programme aimed at establishing a feeling of belonging in the inhabitants of the Italian peninsula whose ancient regional, cultural and linguistic identities were deeply rooted while "there was nothing primordial about Italianness" (Hobsbawm, 1992, p.4). The political class ruling Italy after the unification had to define new elements that would bond the Italians who had little more than geography in common. The colonial venture was going to become the first internationally-relevant act that Italy would carry out as a nation and would define the character of this new state both inside and outside its borders (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005).

Reference to the unitary element can be found at all stages of the colonial history where the intervention in Africa was presented as positive or even necessary for the whole Italian people: the very pursuit of involvement in the colonial landscape was mainly driven by the will to enhance the image of Italy in Europe and therefore the proclaiming of the first African colony in Eritrea in 1890 was presented as an example of national pride; engaging popular writers into producing the manifesto for the war in Libya to underline the right of all the proletarians of Italy to obtain their own piece of Africa to avoid emigration to the American continent; the fascist propaganda depicting the Italians as the rightful heirs of the Roman past in the remake of the empire; the conquest of Ethiopia as the redress of the Adwa defeat that had been cause of embarrassment for all the Italians, amongst others. The colonial experience provided for an exogenous factor that could serve the purpose of flattening the

⁵⁴ Free Translation from the Original Italian

perception of internal differences by concentrating on an external matter that would supposedly benefit everyone.

Once the colonial empire collapsed, the new democratic Italian post-war government's priority on the issue of national unity was that of bringing together Italians of different backgrounds and social strata on the political side. In fact, the political division had been the cause for bloodshed during the last years of the regime, the civil war between fascist supporters and resistance partisans involved the whole country and wrecked the existing asset. In order to strengthen the feeling of belonging aimed at creating a new idea of Italian identity, the government acted in favour of burying the legacy of the political and social discrepancies arisen during the regime. In order to do so, the now distant African colonial reality had to be buried under the fascist ruins too.

During the initial years of the Italian colonial enterprise, the motive for the creation of national identity was strongly embedded in the pro-colony propaganda, a keystone example of which is the famed text by Giovanni Pascoli "*La grande proletaria si é mossa*" - The Great Proletarian, She Has Risen!⁵⁵. This text is an iconic manifesto in favour of the occupation of Libya where a number of nationalistic elements – easy for the population to appeal to – can be detected. Being this piece of writing a representation of the state's attempt to arouse engagement in the support of the intervention in Libya, it is often presented to students in high school when discussing the colonial event. In '*Primo Levi*' high school, where my fieldwork took place, the classes involved in the research all read this text either during Italian literature or History.

This text, in addition to being an interesting insight in the pre-fascist colonial propaganda, provides an example of the legacy that built the connection between colonialism and nationalism with elements still perceptible in the current day discourse on Italianness. The topic of identity appears strongly interwoven when the text encourages the newly united Italians to take pride in their nation regardless of the numerous differences and ethnic

⁵⁵ Translation by Baranello, *Giovanni Pascoli's 'La grande proletaria si e' mossa': A Translation and Critical Introduction* California Italian Studies, 2(1), 2011

mixture. The topic comes back when praising the occupation of Libya as a solution to Italian emigration to America where they are underestimated and mistreated (Baranello, 2011). As in Del Boca (2005), the widespread image of Italians in North America and Northern Europe involved laziness, quick temper, and underdevelopment; these same characteristics would be later on attributed by the Italians to the colonized Arab and African populations. Pascoli's work underlines the nationalistic myth of united Italy being destined to greatness as a legacy of the Roman empire supporting the idea of the Italian rightfulness in claiming the Libyan territories due to the Roman presence on those lands centuries before.

References to the matter of identity become even more pressing in the following years with the influence of the fascist propaganda. The regime put enormous effort into uniformizing the population by means of social activities – such as work, school, sports and entertainment – rituals, producing heroic individuals, collective events and manifestations. The idea of Italianness attributed to the Roman origin, common to all Italians, that same Italianness that had at last culminated in the unification of the motherland, had found one more ideology to feed on: the savage Ethiopians who had caused such dishonour to Italy in the past had become the new external enemy united Italy was to fight.

The fascist regime and the *Duce* did manage to raise excitement over the colonial enterprise and the war of occupation of Ethiopia by use of economic incentives for Italian settlers in the colonies, but most of all through unscrupulous use of propaganda owned and directed by the regime where the principle of freedom of speech was non-existent. Even if the use of propaganda in favour of the colonial occupation was constant, relentless and omnipresent – cinema, radio, papers, public speeches, pamphlets, literature –, the shortness of the colonial experience and the sudden defeat of the regime and its empire did not allow the initial excitement – the most widespread consent for Mussolini and the fascist regime was detected in the very year of the war to Ethiopia namely 1935 and 1936 (Labanca, 2002) – to settle in the population. As hasty as the initial excitement for the overseas empire had arisen so it had disappeared; even so, the legacy of the colonial awareness characterised the view of the nation in the post-war democracies and even in the contemporary society; the long perpetrated myths did not vanish with the colonies' political independence. According to

historian Labanca (2002) the propaganda was fundamental to create consent around the empire – which was small, poor and costly – and took advantage of the colonial enterprise to strengthen the national identity – often overruled by traditional regional identities – through the myth of the 'empire builders'. However, obstacles to this project did exist, such as the limited scholarization, the reduced size of the empire and the internal divisions among colonialist associations alongside the ever-present political tissue of anti-colonialist democrats and socialists. All together these elements created an uneven colonial conscience more superficial and episodic than other identities compared to the other European powers, making its memory equally unbalanced (Labanca 2002, p.222). Even if the propaganda proved to be effective – and increasingly impelling as literacy grew – the whole culture of colonialism had already permeated the discourse well before the fascist regime embarked upon colonial occupation. The ideals of imperialism were deeply rooted in Europe and the topics of the idea of race superiority and the white man's burden that emerged with geographic expeditions were already widespread in Italy (Labanca, 2002, p.224).

The internal political support gained through the colonial expansion shows the evolution of the idea of superiority and fear of other peoples as a political tool that was helping define national identities; by defining what the common enemy was like, the empire was defining itself by contrast. The image Mussolini had of the Italians -not only of the soldiers- was that of a person who blindly believes in the state and its dogmas, strong-willed and inflexible, a 'new man'⁵⁶ (Del Boca, 2005, p. 22) who would sacrifice anything "to save the great common mother"⁵⁷ and to give her strength and purity"⁵⁸ (Del Boca, 2005, p. 22)

The lack of postcolonial debate and the convenient transmission of self-indulgence colonialism-wise had – and still has – effects on the way Italians address identity and belonging. The sudden disappearance of the empire left behind a set of contradictions in the public sphere, that had earlier supported the enterprise and was now acting as if it had not existed. The nationalist approach to colonialism and propaganda distorted the image of the overseas and, to some extent, the foundations of that discourse have resisted till now through

⁵⁶ Free Translation from the Original Italian

⁵⁷ By this expression the author refers to the Italian nation

⁵⁸ Free Translation from the Original Italian

the exceptionalistic approach (Labanca, 2002). Central to the relation between national identity and colonialism is the myth of the good-hearted Italian that became established in the last decades of the nineteenth century and has since then persisted as a proof that Italians acted kindly and in favour of the colonized populations unlike the other European colonizers (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005). This myth supports the idea that the Italians have behaved differently from France or the UK, Italians are depicted as bearers of civilization among the barbarian, both during and after the colonial period, to the point that this ideology is still embedded in the narratives of Italian identity. The idea of the good-hearted Italians was spread at the beginning through colonialism – aided by sympathizing literature such as the novels by Salgari – embedding it into the popular culture and narratives (Del Boca 2015, p.25). During fascism, this ideal was accomplished by means of information manipulation. For instance, the aggression to Ethiopia was justified at first by the propaganda that described Abyssinia as a country of slavery where the Italians would fight to provide well being to oppressed populations; the narrative transformed after the occupation of Ethiopia, no longer described as land of barbarous savages but as home to meek people in need of the benevolent Italians' help to develop. "Vaccinated to the nationalistic arrogance administered in overdose by the past regime" (Del Boca, 2005, p.24) by media and arts, the image the Italians created – and sustained – of themselves would shield from the responsibilities of the colonial period to this very day. This idea was met with wide support in the institutional and intellectual realms and therefore managed to survive after the end of the colonial period, in the post-war era as myth of self-absolution.

III.2. Education as a tool to 'make Italians':

As introduced above, the 'making of Italians', in the sense that the political unification of the country needed to be followed the creation of a feeling of identity unification and collective national awareness, deeply involved the education institutions.

In fact, all the citizens despite their extremely different lifestyles, traditions and even local languages could have been brought together by enhancing the feeling of belonging through school (De Bernardi, 2004). In this framework, besides the teaching of the Italian language –

fundamental to create cohesion – the teaching of history strongly focused on national history celebrated with all its myths in order to arouse pride and interest in the new Italians to become – alongside celebratory literature and military service for the adults. The post-unification textbook publishing houses featured history manuals with the glorification of national heroes of different social strata, Italian genius, celebratory literature, music and poetry hinged not only on the admirable characteristics of the Italian people but on the ability to liberate from the foreign invader exalting the ideal of *Rinascimento* (De Bernardi, 2004). Through the teaching of history, the ideals conveyed were pride and dedication to the nation, justified by images and myths dear to the institutions.

Politicization of history textbooks, as mentioned in the previous chapters, tends to happen in order to maintain consent in relation to the governmental ideals; in Italy this trend can be detected by looking at the school reforms enacted since the end of World War II; they led to a proper political battle fought on school textbooks in order to obtain the monopoly of this tool, so efficient to raise the electors of tomorrow (Baldissara, 2004; Galfré, 2005). For the same reason, according to the established procedure, "there is no state control of textbooks. The state defines history programmes, but then authors and editors decide together how to produce textbooks, and the choice among the many books on offer is left to school committees" (Cajani, 2006, p.37). Being involved in the choice of the textbook or its production exceeds the duties of political bodies, what the state is actually responsible for is precisely the subjects' programmes only. However, the textbooks' contents usually closely follow the governmental guidelines since the teachers tend to choose materials in line with the Ministry programme -since exam tests are issued by the Ministry according to the above-mentioned guidelines. The production of materials that deviate from these standards would, in fact, be economically risky for authors and publishers. This is why the possibility of indirect interference in the choice of textbooks and its contents can exist and -at times- has been expressed. In 1995 Lazio's regional council ruled by the party *Alleanza Nazionale*⁵⁹ defined history textbooks as "falsify[ing] and ignor[ing] certain pages of Italian history portraying them

⁵⁹ Italian right-wing party, that emerged from the neo-Fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano in 1995 (Cajani, 2006, p.37)

in a partisan way [that] artificially feeds a generational gap which has lasted too many years and hinders the reconstruction of a national identity common to all Italians" (Cajani, 2006, p.37). This is an example of what Cajani (2006) calls the Italian "discomfort with contemporary history" (Cajani, 2006, p.38) namely the inability of institutions of different political factions to agree on the approach to recent history. According to Cajani (2006) this issue is not related exclusively to the last decades that witnessed the crumbling apart of the Socialists and Christian Democrats coalitions leaving room to the right and far right parties. "The teaching of contemporary history has been a thorny matter since the very first years of the Republic, object of mostly political controversy that have seen the right-wing and the left-wing in contrast"⁶⁰ (Cajani, 2014, p.2). The struggle in addressing history exists when there are conflicts in the memory – that consequently define identities – that emerge in relation to controversial topics (Bucciarelli, 2007, p.159). In fact, history teaching programmes issued under the various legislations have different intents and approaches to the political, ideological, pedagogical, cultural and historical overviews (Bosco, 2004, p.215).

During the post war years, history teaching underwent political manipulation; Italy had just emerged from a dictatorship and a following civil war based on resistance movements, therefore the post war generation was still strongly tied to the events that had transformed the country in the previous years. As previously mentioned, the ruling democratic leftist parties decided not to open debates over sensitive topics such as fascism – and the colonial past as follows – in order to avoid bringing back to the public discourse the social fractures the war had caused and had not yet healed. The teaching of history was meant to create one solid united people based on the partisan ideals, the aim was that of strengthening and even creating elements to redefine national identity by. However, the lack of public postcolonial debate due to the continuity approach adopted by the post war governments secured the Italians' view of their nation in timeworn myths which were never overtly discredited and, as such, survived in the self-definition of Italianness. According to Cajani (2006) in the post-war period "moderate or right-wing teachers refused to cover recent history in order to avoid politicization of classroom teaching, while left-wing teachers considered it important" (Cajani, 2006, p.38) perpetuating an uneven approach to the topic

⁶⁰ Free Translation from the Original Italian

of contemporary history thus polarizing the youngsters' understanding of the recent past (Cavaglion, 2004, p.233). A wave of criticism regarding political reforms in history teaching came in 1996 when MP Berlinguer established that the last year of secondary school – both middle school and high school – would be dedicated entirely to the study of the twentieth century. Though revolutionary considering the Italian "discomfort with contemporary history" (Cajani, 2006, p.38) the dispositions of the new programme still featured a Eurocentric quality: the study of contemporary history would still be hinged on the happenings and civilizations that were most relevant to the Italian and European cultural landscape (Bosco, 2004).

Additional criticisms arose with the issuing of the new history programme in the year 2000 under De Mauro: in addition to following 1996 reform conceding wider space to contemporary history – already under debate – De Mauro proposed the expansion of the study of history beyond national and European borders including the most relevant elements of other cultures and civilizations – such as Asian empires, pre-Columbian civilizations, the development of sub-Saharan Africa states (Cajani, 2014, p.7; Bosco, 2004, p.227). Following this reform, a group of historians composed a manifesto demanding a redefinition of the programme. The manifesto underlined the importance of maintaining a strong link with topics related to the understanding of Italian and European contemporary situation and the study of the international institutions. What was deemed as fundamental was to "avoid the risk that the global vision of the historical development, though necessary, would jeopardise the full valorization of the Italian and European identity and flatten the diversity of values and of civil conquest"⁶¹ (*Corriere della Sera*, 25 February 2001, p.31). The mobilisation of this group proves how influential history teaching can be and how strong the ties are between education, political ideals, and nationalism.

In the abovementioned historians' approach, the identitarian and nationalistic quality of history teaching is reckoned as paramount in education. History is conceived as the standard

⁶¹ Free Translation from the Original Italian from the "Teaching of History and European identity" Manifesto, first published on 25 February 2001 in *Corriere della sera*, p.31 with the title "thirty-three historians write to De Mauro: this is how we can save history", available on SISCO (Società italiana per lo studio della storia contemporanea) online platform <http://www.sisco.it/articoli/la-storia-contemporanea-nelle-scuole-superiori-1345/la-riforma-dei-cicli-e-la-storia-1346/insegnamento-della-storia-e-identita-europea-1383/>

upon which to build knowledge, to which 'other histories' are compared. National culture, history, circumstances in the youngsters' perception become the only reference when processing information that derives from different historical and cultural circumstance, thus hindering the understanding of why different realities develop into dissimilar contemporary social structures. In addition to this, the lack of a comprehensive global vision of the development of society and economy deprives the students of the ability to make sense of historical events with globally impact, shaping both European and extra-European systems alike. In line with the Eurocentric approach to history teaching is the fact that realities other than the national one are considered marginal. "The history, for instance, of China or Sub-Saharan Africa are not relevant in themselves as fundamental elements to understand past and present history not only of the whole world, but of any of its parts, including Europe. Those histories are useful instead only in the case in which a classmate is Chinese or Senegalese, to be able to interact with them"⁶² (Cajani, 2014, p.10).

De Mauro's attempt to widen the history knowledge base of youngsters in school age, perceived as a threat for the national identity, is soon set aside with the coming to power of the following government (Bosco, 2004). With Moratti⁶³ as the ministry of Public Education, the study of history went back to being ethnocentric, therefore based on Italian, Christian and European identity. This change of direction did not arouse debates among opinionists nor historians as it had been for De Mauro's reform; this can be taken as a "sign that all in all [this reform] met the *communis opinio*"⁶⁴ (Cajani, 2014, p.15). Moratti's reform fell under the conservative label, being her an MP belonging to the ruling right-wing coalition. This political group's view of national history and identity overturned the teaching of this subject by removing awareness-boosting elements related to European conquests and globalization introduced in 1996. In 2005, in fact, as reported by Cajani (2014) in his study of the school reforms in the last 25 years, crucial historiographic concepts such as 'imperialism' and 'colonialism' became concealed behind bland terms such as "Europe and the world in the last

⁶² Free Translation from the Original Italian

⁶³ Letizia Moratti held the charge of Minister of Education, Universities and Research between 2001 and 2006 during the second and third Berlusconi cabinet. She belonged to the conservative right-wing party *Forza Italia* represented by Silvio Berlusconi.

⁶⁴ Free Translation from the Original Italian

decades of 1800s and The competition among states and its consequences"⁶⁵ (Cajani, 2014, p.14). Constant reference to the local regional realities of Italy and their origin was present, and not by chance: one of the parties in the ruling coalition leading the country was the regional party *Lega Nord*.

Education policies underwent changes once again in 2007. Ministry of Public Education Fioroni⁶⁶ envisaged history teaching not only useful as a tool for the creation of a feeling of national belonging, but also a means to educate to multicultural citizenship valuing diversity in Italian society. Even though the idea behind this reform showed open-mindedness, implementing this innovation was hardly efficient since the approach remained fundamentally Eurocentric.

Under the governments that followed, the number of hours dedicated to history teaching was reduced, the space assigned to extra European events remained marginal and "the Eurocentric approach was not even remotely dented: the rest of the world gets a mention only when Europe comes into contact with it"⁶⁷ (Cajani, 2014, p.19).

According to Araújo and Maeso (2010, p.242) the implications of a Eurocentric approach are the creation of an implicitly dichotomic system of reference making the nation-state central in the economic, political and social patterns. This approach naturalises power-violence relations, colonialism and the way in which we talk about them as a consequence.

Eurocentrism is not simply the point of view from which events are told, it is a mechanism that silences other perspectives with the logic of neutralizing all that does not stand up to the standard of Western, democratic and modern (Araújo and Maeso, 2015). This means depriving non-Western agents of the chance to tell their own history if it does not attain to the Western frame of reference thus discarding alternative worldviews. This allows the Western cultural hegemony not only to build the image of itself but also the image of the

⁶⁵ Free Translation from the Original Italian

⁶⁶ Giuseppe Fioroni held the charge of Minister of Education, Universities and Research between 2006 and 2008 during the second Prodi cabinet, he belonged to the left-wing party *Partito Democratico*

⁶⁷ Free Translation from the Original Italian

other by contrast (Said, 1978). By claiming universal validity of the Eurocentric explanation of phenomena, all the coexisting views become radically denied. The concept of Eurocentrism is grounded in the project of modernity especially when it comes to colonialism since it is in global phenomena such as imperialism that the current configurations of power are funded. Just like colonialism and imperialism were some of the conditions that led the powers to reach the position they now have in the international realm, narratives that still perpetuate denial or mystification of colonialism became founding elements for the construction of the contemporary wealth and status (Araújo and Maeso, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Eurocentrism embedding the history textbooks is particularly relevant in the description of the processes linked to the Italian colonial experience. The ruling classes, focused on cooperation between existing groups willing to restore a peaceful atmosphere of unity, intentionally carried on a self-preservation project by avoiding to overtly explain the happenings and set of consequences the fascist and colonial processes brought about, in which way such events had so deeply affected the Italians' civil awareness. In so doing, by neglecting historical events in their thorough complexity they deteriorated the social function of history teaching: creating citizens with democratic ideals. According to Durkheim (1956), the educational system has the task to impart values to the younger generation (Yates, 1999) and, the National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education clearly state that the values of democracy and active citizenship are features the study of history has to root in the youngsters⁶⁸. It is due to the failure in critically explaining the fascist advent and development and the partisan movement (added to the fascist ideals that had previously been inculcated in the Italians' cultural baggage) that soon after World War II there was a rapid escalation of neofascist trends among youngsters (De Michele 2006). Leoni and Tappi (2010) reinforce the idea that teaching of colonial experience was used as a platform to strengthen the feeling of national identity, yet not based on the transmission of constructive principles but appealing to stereotypical images: "from representation of the Italian as the tireless worker and bearer of civilization to that of 'the good-hearted Italian', even to the omissions and silencing, on the other end, of the less edifying aspects of the Italian

⁶⁸ National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education (p. 17-19)

colonial adventure"⁶⁹ (Leoni and Tappi, 2010, p. 155). By means of these already consolidated myths, it was possible to awaken pride and feeling of national belonging in people. Myths, in fact, worked both by praising the positive qualities of the Italian people and by juxtaposition to the 'other', the allegedly underdeveloped rebellious colonized populations. The myths have survived the dismantling of the fascist rule and the colonial mindset is still present in educational tools that are contributing to the perpetuation of a nationalistic view of identity. The lasting of prejudice affects also the idea that persists of the extra-European populations and in particular the Africans, since the traits that had been entrusted to the African former colonized populations was then extended to the African peoples in general due to the lack of postcolonial debate causing the persistence of the colonialist mindset. It is however worth underlining that this aspect does not belong to the legacy of the Italian colonialism only. the survival of myths produced during the colonialist period is a feature that can be detected in the wider European framework in general, and is therefore a consistent element present in the collective memory and perception of former imperialist countries.

In relation to the Eurocentric approach to the colonial phenomenon and its legacy, according to De Michele (2006) it is still possible to detect a differentiation in the presentation of the Italian colonial phenomenon as related exclusively to the chronological framework in which the occupation happened, inserted in chapters discussing national affairs and internal challenges of the Italian state and therefore detached from the rest of the European imperialist experience and any previous or following reference in time (De Micheli, 2006, p. 135).

III.3. Youngsters' perception of national identity, the role of teaching colonialism in the representation of self:

During my field study, I performed direct observation of history lessons hinged on the topic of Italian colonialism. All the teachers involved in this study mainly explain historical events by referring to the actions undertaken by Italy by use of first-person narration. This telling technique is typical of history teaching due to the emphasis it adds thus facilitating the

⁶⁹ Free Translation from the Original Italian

students' involvement since "If a bond is created between the [...] now and then, past events may begin to seem more relevant and important. Because of the affinity suggested by the use of 'we', 'us' and 'our', pupils can develop a sense of why they are learning these things." (Tate, 1995 quoted by Phillips, 1996, p.392)⁷⁰. Nevertheless, this 'us-them' narrative might reinforce the dichotomic approach proper of the Eurocentric system reiterating the idea of duality, where us (colonizers) are active, and them (colonized) are passive, victims that can only limit to defend themselves from attacks. A similar duality can be found also in the textbook both in the written text and visual narrative. As previously mentioned, the Eurocentric approach permeates the discourse in so far as the narrative does not include African pre and post-colonial conditions nor the legacy of this historical phenomenon. These elements are avoided in the main narration of the history textbook and mention to them appears only in the one page of extra contents at the end of the chapter. The students themselves stated that these are those

"pages we don't even have a look at"⁷¹

(focus group set 1, group A, February 2019).

In this extra content page⁷², unlike in the text, the above mentioned elements are discussed, such as the relationship between Italy and Libya subsequent to the decolonization year that put the African country under a different light: Libya is, in fact, a proactive player that demands reparation payments, confiscates lands owned by the Italians and is home to a strong internal independence movement.

⁷⁰ In the framework of my research I focused not only on the contents of the teaching of colonial history, but also on the form and, in particular, on the subtext conveyed -more or less voluntarily- in the use of certain expressions and terminologies. I deemed important, however, to call attention also on the techniques used by the teachers in class to engage the students and keep them interested in the lesson. The narration strategies might, in fact, express meaning too. The most relevant example I detected in this field was the use of the first-person narrator that would enhance affinity between the students and the historical national identity.

⁷¹ Free translation from the original Italian

⁷² Brancati, Antonio and Trebi Pagliarani. *Dialogo con la storia e l'attualità 3. L'età contemporanea*, La Nuova Italia, 2012, p. 82.

As far as the visual aids are concerned, the images provided contribute to underlining the opposing nature of the Italians and the Africans from the colonies proposing duality as the natural division. As far as images of the Italians are concerned, Italy is present through fascist pamphlets and celebratory postcards depicting the Italians as restless technologically advanced soldiers. The Africans are instead visually presented in pictures of the time, where they appear either as victims of the Italian military power, such as in the picture showing dead Ethiopians in the streets of Addis Ababa, or as askari, subjugated to the white Italians of higher ranks.

As stated by one professor during my fieldwork in class, the power of words used when describing phenomena of similar nature that occurred in different areas of the world implies a different degree of acceptance of such historical events. During one of the classes hinged on the history of Italian colonialism, one professor introduced the topic of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia including in its explanation the subject of Ethiopian liberation movements. He underlined that Ethiopia did not simply passively accept the Italian rule but the head of the state turned to the League of Nations to report Italian invasion and seek for support in removing the aggressor. In so doing Teacher D reminded the students of the Fourteen Points of Wilson and the principle of the right of people to self-determination violated by the Italian intervention. The Ethiopian liberation movements that followed occupation were driven by ideals that

"we could call *risorgimentale*⁷³, but this term is not used for other peoples, we only use it for ourselves, the others are considered terrorists so beware of the use of this term [terrorism]"⁷⁴

(teacher D, February 2019).

By calling independent movements in countries other than our own 'terrorists' or 'rebels', while we refer to the Italian movements with the terms *partisans*, *Risorgimento*, *irredentism*,

⁷³ Related to the *Risorgimento* movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that led Italy to independence from foreign rule and national unity, source: <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/risorgimento>

⁷⁴ Free Translation from the Original Italian

we bestow different implications over events triggered by similar conditions, and, subsequently, the nationalistic and Eurocentric matrix endures.

During the first set of focus groups, the topic treated with the students was very general since it involved the age of imperialism in an unspecified way. When interacting, the students could spot of the colonial phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Spontaneously, students started talking about what they perceive to be effects of the colonization on the colonies. What didn't emerged were the changes and impact on European powers through the colonial encounters. When led to reasoning on this matter, they struggled to gather ideas for debate and when someone spoke they all started their sentences by underlining that what they were about to say were mere hypothesis. What emerged from their conversation was that the following aspects might have undergone changes for the European powers following the colonial experience: potentially new international relations due to the changes in the global balance of powers, cultural crossings, "loss of identity"⁷⁵ (focus group set 1, group F, February 2019) both for the dominating and the dominated populations, possibly terrorism as revenge towards colonizers, migrations mostly towards European countries speaking the language previously exported. Throughout the debate, the students made reference almost exclusively to the British and French environments leaving Italy aside. The focus of these debates was in fact not Italy per se but the imperialist world as a whole. However, the practical examples in reference to the students' debates, especially in the case of implications of colonialism for colonizers, were always directed at other European countries excluding Italy. This aspect of the focus group highlights two specific attitudes towards the way in which the Italian education system envisages colonization: firstly the perspective is exclusively binary and Eurocentric – the fact that students had never discussed the idea that colonizing countries might undergo changes due to their colonial projects shows that there are only one actor and one victim; second of all, Italy is not considered a post-colonial country – Italy was hardly ever mentioned throughout the focus group and never considered when talking about the current influence of this phenomenon. The fact that education does not pass the message of Italy being a fully-fledged postcolonial country despite the different experience it had in comparison to France and the UK, pushes new

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generations into growing a communal sense of exclusion in relation to the colonial phenomenon and therefore they base their notions of Italianness only on other historical and cultural aspects. This allows Italians to feel entitled to applying different standards when it comes to facing the social changes and challenges triggered by postcolonialism.

In addition to discussing the perception of the Italian colonial history to understand what remains in the collective memory of the colonial experience, one of the debate inputs of the second set of focus groups was aimed at understanding what the students perceive to be the legacy of the colonial process. During the second set of focus groups, the conversation target became Italy and the same input was submitted for debate: what Italy has inherited from its colonial experience in Africa. In this instance, the students found it harder to share ideas, they could not think of what in Italy or in the Italian culture could possibly bear the influence of colonialism. Most of the students stated that, in their view, nothing concerning colonialism can be found in Italy, neither physically present nor in the culture. Delving deeper, some students managed to express the following ideas regarding the legacy of colonialism in Italy itself: immigration, the way in which Italians negatively perceive the foreigners, the feeling of failure at the attempt of taking advantage of African resources – unlike the French and the British, the comparison with these two imperialist powers permeated the whole debate. Some students stated that they can imagine one of the effects of colonialism to be the feeling of superiority since

"it does not seem to me that Italians have a positive opinion of immigrants"⁷⁶

(focus group set 2, group C, February 2019).

The colonial experience being entangled to the fascist regime arouse debates on the fact that elements of fascism might still be alive in our culture such as fascist colonial songs and the belief that the fascist regime might have contributed positively to the Italian system and society. This subject emerged mainly when students reported what they heard about the fascist regime from grandparents. On the other hand, the feeling of failure was detected by

⁷⁶ Free Translation from the Original Italian

the students as being possibly one of the reasons why colonialism is not a widely debated topic:

"[colonialism] it was almost a failure, I mean, the message that came across was that we gave it a try but we did not manage to attain as much as the UK or France, there is almost negationism, as if we hadn't done anything bad, and if the colonialism that caused some harm was carried out only by the other nations, not Italy [...] we were not able to achieve anything and so we did not do anything wrong. If anything, we were the ones who got hurt [...]. Even if we only had three little states but we did as bad as the others basically" ⁷⁷

(focus group set 2, group F, February 2019).

The idea that the great colonial enterprise as it had been broadcasted in the fascist propaganda did not succeed, is fully accepted and internalized by the students; the awareness that migration and colonization are connected on some level also exists. There is, however, no clarity on the historical and political development following the expulsion of the Italian army and institutions from the former colonies in 1947, the mere narration of colonialism as a set of dates and happening reinforces the idea of this phenomenon being isolated in itself. As for the myths inculcated by the propaganda that still pervade the perception of foreigners, one student says that something is still palpable in contemporary Italy is

"the idea of superiority many people still carry [...] the contempt and disgust towards people of different skin colour, the prejudice that, according to me, is rooted from before" ⁷⁸

(focus group set 2, group E, February 2019).

During the second set of focus groups the topic of identity was also faced and the debate was presented by asking the students what they perceive as the elements that defines them as Italians, what elements defined the Italians during the fascist period and which elements we could consider as prevalent in contemporary national identity – the raw

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materials of Italianness. The students perceived that by means of the propaganda, Mussolini emphasized a stereotypical idea of Italianness that could not be based on physical characteristics though. The students state that it would not make sense,

"in Germany you could go for the blond with blue eyes but not in Italy"

(focus group set 2, group C, February 2019).

In Italy, unity had to be strengthened by instituting common practices: the life was controlled by the regime, therefore, work and afterword activities became the same for everybody, making the Italians feel more united through intensively shared everyday experiences. Other values, such as men as soldiers and hard workers and women primordially as mothers were reintroduced or revived.

"the typical aspects of a stereotyped image of the Italian that everyone could identify with. Like the idea of the Italian family, the woman that is mother, numerous families where they eat all together [...], the Italian men's sturdiness, the healthy body, the sport"

(focus group set 2, group C, February 2019).

Another element of unification according to the students was created by the constant reference to the Roman empire, an example of greatness common to all Italians boosting the feeling of superiority. In no case did the students mention that unity was created, in addition to all the aspects listed above, by the notion of a common enemy, namely Abyssinia. The students showed not to have any perception of this matter as an element of union during the fascist regime, possibly due to the lack of public debate over the topic of colonialism related to the project of building a national identity.

When approaching the topic of national identity and belonging, the students were asked to brainstorm and debate in the framework of the focus group over which are those elements that they perceive as unitary elements that make the Italians one united community today. The students of all the groups named more or less the same elements such as fashion,

cuisine, artistic heritage, sports, established state borders, made in Italy production. In a few cases characteristics such as traditions and festivities were brought up. Yet, they were questioned by other students as being possibly more regional than nationally perceived as relevant in terms of identity. Language was an element named three times and all the three times approached differently: one student named it as element of unity; language variety within the state was perceived by another student as an element relevant to the Italian cultural baggage; the third student, on the other hand, identified language as a differentiating element due to all its variants and dialects within the country. In Italy, where internal diversity is considered an obstacle to the feeling of unity and belonging (Andall, 2002; Giuliani, 2013), the topic of multiculturalism and multiethnic are not welcome in the public debate; the reforms that tended to take a step back regarding these modern-day social challenges are a practical example of this statement. In four focus groups it was possible to bring further the discourse about national belonging. Students debated what elements of unity can be found in the political discourse. In three out of four cases the topic of immigration emerged: according to the students' experience the current political rhetoric tends to strengthen the feeling of one sole community through the use of slogans and policies directed at creating

"a feeling of unity towards one common enemy"⁷⁹

(focus group set 2, group C, February 2019)

thus making opposition to immigration a unifying element in a country with such varied regional identities within itself.

Over the last decades, the characteristics of the so-called Italianness have evolved and the role played by school in the transformation of some elements and the maintenance of others regarding this notion is substantial. All the elements analysed above point to the fact that on a general basis it is possible to state that nowadays official narratives tend to keep consent of the socio-political establishment that issues them by fostering "a prevalently protective vision of the national identity in the contemporary context viewed as increasingly

⁷⁹ Free Translation from the Original Italian

multicultural”⁸⁰(Araújo and Maeso, 2013, 163). This approach mirrors the system denying its postcolonial nature, where the debate on where the country stands in the contemporary global postcolonial realm.

III.4. Final considerations over the formation of the concept of Italianness in relation to legacy of colonialism:

Forgetfulness of colonialism is one of the key elements of Eurocentrism (Maldonado-Torres, 2004, apud Maeso and Araújo, 2015, p. 3) that allows a more indulgent interpretation of the ideological conquests and social advancements of the West leaving aside the racist and imperialist aspects that pervaded this process of historical formation. Eurocentrism allows to label all Western dishonourable actions as dark chapters or appendix to the glorious history. It is in this view that it becomes necessary to turn European history into the standard for the students to identify with the Western culture; its core elements will become the ruler by which to measure modernity, technological advancement, industrialization, democracy and so forth. Following this approach, history teaching might help build binary mind structures of 'us' as central and 'them' as peripheral thus neutralizing relations of power that – to the students' understanding – become the natural and inevitable evolution of historical processes – such as colonialism, racism, the existence of the so-called third world, Western humanitarian intervention in underprivileged areas of the world and so on (Araújo and Maeso, 2010). All this relates to the topic of identity since the representation of others implies the construction of self emphasizing elements of belonging that distinguish the two binary categories 'us versus them' and as a consequence projecting specific meaning onto concepts such as Africa as opposed to Europe, colonial empire, underdevelopment, civilization, nation and so on with the risk of producing and passing down a distorted insight of history in the younger generations.

Even though there has been some kind of resistance over how education should treat some aspects of fascism such as colonialism, national guidelines from the Ministry of Education, among other objectives, at reinforcing citizenship awareness and the founding

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ideals of the constitution. Yet, it is important to remember that nationalism and identity, it is understood, are not only created, reinforced passed down and fostered in the school environment. Therefore, it is worth taking into account the external inputs that the students are exposed to on a daily basis.

When it comes to the Italian national identity the automatic referents are the phenomena of the country unification, the regional differences, the occupation of Italy by other peoples in the past centuries, yet there are other elements at the root in the so-called Italianness too. The matter of racial self-definition through the naturalized association of Italianness and whiteness that over the last years have become mutually exclusive characteristics are for example features linked to the Italian colonial past. In order to address this topic, emigration identity and the Southern question need to be brought into play as they are interwoven with the colonial phenomenon and its racist nature in as much as "whiteness has constituted for Italians a form of representational cohesion at different historical moments, providing an ideological and discursive tool for national identification and self-representation before, during, and after colonialism. Notwithstanding a 'self-reflexive colour-blindness' (Portelli 30), race has been a pivotal element in Italy's cultural discourse" (Lombardi-Diop, 2012, p.176).

Chapter IV:

Immigration and racism seen through the lens of colonialism

IV.1. The colonial roots of racial discrimination in Italy:

Italian colonialism includes numerous aspects lacking debate, as previously mentioned. In particular, racist characterization of the so-called *Oltremare*⁸¹ empire is one of the features whose legacy is often left aside in the public debate, hence limiting the whole understanding of present-day racist events sweeping across Italy and Europe.

Along the 1800s, ethnographic expeditions supported by the colonial and geographical associations – such as the Royal Geographical Society to name one – had been spreading their reports throughout the continent. The European explorers observed the African populations' cultures and political systems through the lens of Western superiority. This way, their expedition reports issued in Europe contributed to consolidating myths and prejudice, further reproduced and spread to the public opinion by means of arts and the media. In this framework, when the Italian liberal government decided to undertake expeditions to Africa and start the occupation of the Horn, the population's mind had already been shaped into considering the European initiatives in Africa – and by extension, the Italian – as heroic, adventurous missions aimed at civilizing savage Africa. In fact, even before the colonial expeditions, the scientific and ethnological studies in Africa were filtered by racial assumptions laying the ground for the perpetration of prejudice and misconceptions over the African peoples (Fredrickson, 2002). When the Italian intervention in Eastern Africa starts, it aligns to the political and cultural imperialist and racist trend. This shift had repercussions on the proclaimed national ideals of self-determination and *Risorgimento* that, following the Italian unification, had characterised the public opinion. It was by embracing the colonialist attitude of Western superiority that the Italian government entered the Scramble for Africa.

⁸¹ Term used to indicate the overseas territories under the Italian occupation in Africa

Following the other European powers' approach to imperialist expansion based on white racial superiority, made it easier for the Italian government to obtain consent among the masses, especially once Eritrea was formally declared the first Italian African colony in 1890 (Calchi Novati, 1994). According to Labanca (2002), the Italian colonialist project could take advantage of the already existing imperialist mindset in Europe to foster the concepts of racial discrimination and Western superiority aided by the cinema and the press. The culmination of the racist approach to the Italian colonial experience came with the occupation of Ethiopia under the fascist rule. A couple of years after the occupation, in 1937, a set of discriminatory rules based on race was introduced in the Italian *Oltremare*.

As suggested by Labanca (2002), racial laws in the colonies, it is understood, did not appear at a random moment; their issuing was preceded by a slow escalation of changes in the metropolis that inevitably influenced the life and legislation in the colonies, which would then have repercussions on the metropolis itself too.⁸²

Racial segregation was a common practice in the European colonies all over the world; drawing from the theory of the non-Western population being racially inferior, the Italian rulers implemented targeted forms of subjugation in the different territories conquered (Labanca, 2002, p.231). This was already happening under the liberal rule through the influence in the local politics by choosing chiefs and judges on the basis of their will to bend to the new Italian regulations based mostly on military law and by exploiting local manpower (Labanca, 2002, p.203). The greatest change came during the fascist period when attitudes of racial discrimination and exploitation of the colonial territories and inhabitants became formally institutionalized. Racist rhetoric introduced by fascism featured the lack of policies aimed at emancipation of the local populations – that the propaganda would report in Italy even if non existent in the colonies – and the creation of a proper set of racist laws to support the so-called direct domination (Labanca, 2002, p.252). By this term the fascist regime meant implementing racial segregation and repression based on the alleged benevolent understanding of the immobility of the African populations which could not be assimilated to

⁸² Once the racial legislation aimed at maintaining pure the Italian race was introduced in the colonies, the people from the colonies living in the metropolis were expelled and the mixed-race relationship became illegal also in the Italian territory. Following the racist nature of the fascist regime, the principle of the pure race was applied to the metropolis itself and the antisemitic laws were introduced.

the Italians and would rather be preserved to maintain their traditions without being corrupted by the contact with the Italians (Labanca, 2002, p.252). These measures were propagandized using as the core motive the ideal of national superiority of the Italians as a people and as a race, the right to expand as a proletarian nation to provide lands and avoid further emigration, the intention to bring civilization and end to barbarities happening in Africa (Labanca, 2002; Calchi Novati, 1994; Del Boca, 2005)

Even before the issuing of the racial laws, restrictions of local populations' rights had been introduced in the already existing colonies. In Eritrea, after 1933, there was a further reduction of indigenous autonomy and authority and in Somalia the greatest differentiation was in the limitation of the local workers' rights. As far as Libya is concerned, the Cyrenaica and Tripolitania parliaments were abolished leading to the unification of the two regions in 1934 thus restoring pre-modern clan-based ties in the administration of the area and it was turned into the so-called *Quarta Sponda* (literally meaning 'fourth shore')⁸³. By declaring Libya national territory new measures were introduced to incentive Italian emigration towards the colony such as demographic colonization, deportation of the natives and local political rights repression. This inclusion, however, did not bring about any advantages for the Libyans: the suggestion of conceding the Italian citizenship was set aside in favour of a so-called colonial citizenship featuring no privilege (Labanca, 2002, p.349).

The fascist regime also managed to carry out the occupation of Ethiopia which was annexed by annihilation of the state's social and political system. Here the measure put into action before the introduction of the racial legislation included militarization of the administration and removal of local political chiefs through the so-called *divide et impera* technique: the territory was split in regions deliberately, regardless of the existing administrations based on ethnic groups. The Italian army managed to take advantage of pre-existent rivalries (such as Christians versus Muslims, Oromo promoted as ruling class over the Amhara) leading to a ethnicity-based power chain (Labanca, 2002, p.353).

⁸³ Term used under the fascist rule to describe Libya after being declared part of the Italian national territory. The term 'fourth shore' means that the Libyan territory was the additional one facing the Mediterranean sea in addition to the three coasts of the Italian peninsula.

The justification for occupation with the aim of bringing civilization also did not attain to the promises made to the Italians: education in the colonies was not intended to improve the lives of the locals but instead was turned into a means of oppression. Where school were instituted, they maintained Italians separate from mixed-race and local children in order to preserve the prestige over the indigenous. Scholarization run by local entities was also hindered, Italian became the compulsory teaching language and the locals could access only elementary technical institutes. As a consequence, the local students' rates dropped while the fascist youth association for Italian children in the colonies became increasingly stronger. In Libya, for example, by 1931 the number of Italian students equaled that of Arab students even if the Arab population was thirteen times the amount if of Italian settlers; education was feared by the fascist government as a means that would enhance the anti-Italian sentiment and reinforce nationalism in the colonies (Labanca, 2002, p.337).

According to Labanca (2002), before the introduction of the racial legislation in 1937 it was already possible to spot two types of racist behaviour present in the political and social realm of Italy and the colonies, typical of any imperialist relation. These attitudes underwent further radicalization and turned into the body of law of the state becoming institutionalized. One aspect is what Labanca (2002) calls " 'political' racism "⁸⁴ (Labanca, 2002, p.415) that involves all those practices aimed at altering socio-economic systems so as to fuel internal divisions in the conquered territories. By this we mean repression of the rights of part of the population labelled as racially different in order to subjugate them and undermine their very status of human beings: concentration camps, deportation, segregation. The second element building the basis for the institutionalization of racial discrimination is the so-called "widespread racism"⁸⁵ (Labanca, 2002, p.418) enacted by the Italian settlers in the colonies. This attitude was based on prejudice towards the local populations and the misconception on the Italian community itself as having a positive impact on the native society thus building up the myth of the good-hearted Italian.

The racial legislation introduced on 30th December 1937 "was not limited to a law: it availed itself of a pervasive and differentiated normative production and it activated a series

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of attitudes, behaviour, and praxis whose entirety and consequences still have to be recreated"⁸⁶ (Labanca, 2002, p.355). This set of norms punished any sort of inter-ethnic relationship (including the so-called *madamato*⁸⁷) or contact and, as a consequence, denied mixed-race children the right to be entitled the Italian citizenship by means of adoption or claim of paternity. Along social segregation came the physical separation of public spaces, neighbourhoods, public transport. The effects of this legislation, applied in the colonies, had effects in the metropolis too: any settler from the colonies living in Italy underwent the expulsion process. The roots for the enactment of these norms laid at the core of the fascist outlook: the regime had showed concerns with the issue of the purity of race since the very beginning of the rule. Following this, in addition to the 1937 racial laws, a specific set of 'Norms concerning the mixed-race'⁸⁸ issued in 1940 – that targeted the children of one African parent – aimed at excluding them from any sort of participation in the white society. While the liberal governments had showed a benevolent attitude towards mixed-race children – especially those claimed by the Italian parent – the fascist regime broke with this praxis in favour of the sole objective of race preservation. This revealed the complete lack of interest in the understanding of the colonial societies' systems and resources: other European powers such as the UK, in fact, deemed the mixed-race generation as a profitable intermediary for a deeper penetration in the colonized society (Labanca, 2002, p. 358).

Another element that showed the strong correlation of happenings and policy-making between the metropolis and the colonies lies in the introduction of racial legislation in the Italian national territory following that issued in Northern and Eastern Africa. Antisemitic racial laws were enacted in Italy in 1938 following the alliance with Nazi Germany. With the introduction of this racial legislation in the colony before the metropolis, it becomes undeniable to state that racism was one of the building blocks of Fascism, thus making "the

⁸⁶ Free Translation from the Original Italian

⁸⁷ Relationship between an Italian man and an African woman that could result in mixed-race marriage, source: <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/madamato>

⁸⁸ Free Translation from the Original Italian

history of the colonial expansion useful for the comprehension of the European history"⁸⁹ (Labanca, 2002, p.420).

Even if the effects of the Italian racial laws did not reach as wide a scale as in the South African case, their effect was both immediate and intense. These norms appeared at a time in which in the colonies run by the other European powers the concepts of autonomy and independence were gaining ground. By issuing racial laws in contrast with the increasing acceptance of these ideals, the fascist regime showed complete disregard towards them, making the modalities of the colonial occupation once more anachronistic and frowned upon internationally.

It is true that these norms reflected already existing trends of behaviour, nevertheless they "constituted an exceptional aggravation to the intrinsic implicit and explicit racism of any colonial situation: in fact, they funded institutional racism beyond any colonial racism composed of prejudice, behaviour, ideologies, attitudes eccetera. The institutional racism introduced by those norms became, as a matter of fact, mandatory"⁹⁰ (Labanca, 2002, p.356) hence causing political, economic and psychological changes.

The issuing of these regulations did not meet all the settlers living in the colonies with agreement and they did not imply an immediate change of attitude by all the Italian inhabitants towards the natives. Part of the settlers did not attain to the indications of the racial legislation thus weakening the effectiveness of the racist project. Due to the uneven application of these laws and the partial popularity of the colonial enterprise among the Italians, contradictions related to the occupation of African territories emerged in the national conscience. In fact, the colonial phenomenon popular support proved to be unstable due to the inconsistency of the myths and information conveyed by the propaganda despite its intense activity.

Given all the above-mentioned processes, the matter into question for this study is by means of which pattern of behaviour the legacy of this composite racist attitude might still exist in present-day Italy and be passed on to the next generations.

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Firstly, an element to consider when dealing with legacy is the contradictory approach of the postwar administrations – mirrored by social agents such as the media and education policies – to the divulgation of information regarding the colonial empire and the relationship entertained with the African states that had been occupied by the Italian military and political powers. The unclear responses to the colonial matters became increasingly public in the 1970s when the formerly occupied territories started to demand admission of colonial responsibilities, economic reparation, support in internal conflicts or return of confiscated historical artwork. The Italian government did not follow an univocal line in responding these requests and it took a long time to publicly acknowledge responsibilities – president Scalfaro attended moral obligation of condemning the Italian occupation of Ethiopia only in 1997; the government admitted using gases in the occupation of Ethiopia in 1996 (Del Boca, 2003, p. 25); Axum Obelisk was returned in 2008⁹¹. The delayed responses to obligations were accompanied by the institutional obstructionism in the study and divulgation of colonial history and the perpetuation of the self-forgiving myth of the good-hearted Italian, the different colonialism and that of Italy as the bridge between Europe and Africa.

Subsequently, in the eighties and nineties the debate over the topic of colonialism made its way to the public realm; even so it kept following opposing trends since while the will to assume and publicly claim responsibilities was embraced by part of the political class – such as President Scalfaro's declaration –, forgetfulness, revival of the myths and politics of nostalgia were still present among the most conservative political factions. These opposing trends managed to coexist due to the freedom to interpret and revise the history of fascism and colonialism that the ruling class had allowed by avoiding public debate. Different reactions to the historical events involving Africa had repercussion also on the politics implemented to manage the first relevant immigration flows leading to the divergence of opinion regarding civil reaction to new forms of xenophobia and racism. At the time in which the last generation of those who had life experience in Northern and Eastern Africa first-hand was disappearing, the public opinion was becoming increasingly polarized over these topics. (Labanca, 2002). One of the most iconic examples of public opinion and intellectual world

⁹¹ News reported on 04/09/2008 in the national newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*
https://www.corriere.it/esteri/08_settembre_04/axum_etiopia_rinnovata_amicizia_tensioni_eritrea_9223bf46-7abd-11dd-a3dd-00144f02aabc.shtml

polarization was the 1995-1996 debate between journalist and historian Angelo Del Boca and Indro Montanelli, journalist and former soldier in colonial war in Ethiopia⁹². Only during the second half of the nineties did the institutions start to make official declarations establishing undeniable truths – such as the admission of wrongdoings in Ethiopia. Even if this step is to be regarded as fundamental towards the acknowledgement of the past and the will to come to terms with it, the previous decades allowed misconceptions to sink into the Italians' consciousness complicating the process of the public opinion's decolonization intended as the ability to get in touch with colonial history, accept it and understand how it still influences our society.

IV.2. The topic of race in society and in the educational system:

The legacy of institutional silence over the history of colonialism and racial discrimination, the contradictory approach to the topic of acceptance of responsibilities in the former *Oltremare* can still be detected in the contemporary educational approach to these processes. The historical dimension of the analysis of textbooks provides a fundamental framework of research when focussing on legacy and contemporary society. Researchers De Michele (2006) and Tappi and Leoni (2010) focused on studying the way in which the colonial experience was presented in history manuals in different decades after the second world war and, what is most outstanding as far as content is concerned, is the heterogeneity in the presentation of historical events.

Along the whole post-war period until the beginning of the seventies, the rhetoric linked to colonialism was basically the same as during the fascist time; of course the regime was no longer praised and vocabulary was neutralized but the myths of the good-hearted Italians and the positive impact of intervention on the colonies were maintained. This prompted to pass down nationalist myths and a racist mentality to a generation whose national identity was still being restored after the collapse of the regime (De Michele, 2006).

⁹² The debate was focused mainly on the use of chemical weapons in Ethiopia <https://www.corriere.it/extra-per-voi/2016/04/02/armi-chimiche-etiopia-l-ammissione-montanelli-54d37986-f8fc-11e5-b97f-6d5a0a6f6065.shtml>

Alongside this trend of tolerance of fascist paradigms, some authors of textbooks such as Pietro Silva – whose edition was published in 1952 – decided to bypass the sensitivity of this issue – on which there was no guideline from the institutions – by avoiding to mention the fascist experience as a whole. Eluding to talk about the dictatorship implied silencing the colonial intervention and its racist connotation too (De Michele, 2006).

In the seventies, giving the advancement in historiography, research, and greater accessibility to archives, debate started to catch on. However, in Italian history textbooks a myth survived, that of the singularity of Italian colonialism: Italian military occupation and intervention in Africa is still perceived – and sometimes described – as less cruel and more tolerant towards the locals, bringing civilization and education to the native population. Due to the weak economic condition of Italy during the decades of the colonization, the idea of having embarked on the colonial venture for morally worthy reasons – such as the civilizing mission – was perpetuated. The apparent lack of economic involvement paved the way for the idea of a more tolerant, less ruthless and even beneficial occupation (De Michele, 2006; Tappi and Leoni 2010). In Italy, the myth of the good-hearted Italians – that helped the local populations in Africa by building schools and roads – still persists even if historiography nowadays clearly states the horrors committed in the former occupied territories. It is in this dimension of feeling different that racism has persisted. By this I mean that there has been no institutionally approved racist mentality, manifestation, nor instigation; yet there has not been any debate over racism in the colonies and as a legacy either. This behaviour has led to the racist roots of nationalism and identity to be untouched and endure as a sleeper cell in the collective cultural baggage (Labanca, 2002; Lombardi-Diop 2012).

In the contemporary Italian framework the legacy of the racist attitudes and nationalist myths of the colonial fascist era becomes visible in the political choices; talking about a revival of racism in Italy today is supported by the data of the last national political elections in 2018. At a national level the right wing coalition, led by the *Lega Nord* – a regional xenophobic anti-immigration party – obtained 37% in the Chamber of Deputies and a similar pattern can be detected in the election of the Senate of the Republic (Ministry of Internal Affairs)⁹³ Even

⁹³ Dipartimento degli Affari Interni e Territoriali, Archivio Storico delle Elezioni, <http://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=04/03/2018&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=S>

though the main supporters of the *Lega Nord* are still concentrated in the traditional areas of Lombardy and Veneto region, comparing the figures provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs regarding 2013 and 2018 national political elections provides with an insight in the change of trends. An unprecedented number of votes has been obtained by the *Lega* also in the South and in the traditionally left-wing supporting regions⁹⁴ It is self-evident that the priorities of voters have shifted towards the typical right-wing concerns, and the *Lega Nord* was able, thanks to the significant changes made to its regional rhetoric, to reap consent based on its anti-immigration, xenophobic and nationalistic discourse strongly based on the reinforcement of law and order measures thus creating a fertile ground for votes that in previously directed elsewhere. The xenophobic rhetoric of the *Lega* and the media's exploitation of the working class' sense of economic insecurity blamed on the immigration as a cause for competition over limited resources (Agnew and Brusa, 1999) had visible repercussions over the election outcomes. As far as the *Lega Nord* position in matter of immigration, when it comes to international protection programmes the emphasis is drawn upon bilateral agreements with African countries to increase repatriation, assisted refoulement, blockage and prevention of emigration flows, reduction of responsibility and engagement by the Italian government, greater intervention of international actors, stricter anti-terrorism security measures contrasting the inflow of undocumented migrants. As far as integration is concerned, there is specific mention of relationships with Muslim immigrants stressing the importance of homogenization and total uniformation to Italian laws, values and customs promoting an assimilation approach implying dilution of cultural heterogeneity and invisibility of difference (*Lega Nord* 2018 election programme p.6-8)⁹⁵. Another currently debated topic in Italy the *Lega Nord* is contrary to, is the potential amendment to the existing law granting the second generation citizenship that would extend this right to a wider number

⁹⁴ In 2013 the *Lega Nord* obtained around 0,20% in Sicily and Calabria; in 2018 the percentage of votes escalated to over 5%; in the traditionally left-wing supporting region Emilia Romagna the *Lega Nord* experienced a dramatic upsurge from 2,59% in 2013 to 19,93% in 2018. Source: Dipartimento degli Affari Interni e Territoriali, Archivio Storico delle Elezioni, <http://elezionistorico.interno.gov.it/index.php?tpel=C&dtel=04/03/2018&tpa=I&tpe=A&lev0=0&levsut0=0&es0=S&ms=S>

⁹⁵ Lega, Elezioni 2018, Programma di Governo <https://www.leganord.org/component/phocadownload/category/5-elezioni?download=1514:programma-lega-salvini-premier-2018>

of foreign-born children of children of immigrant parents. The *Lega Nord* disapproves of the amendment since in the framework of positive valorisation of the community, preservation of group integrity and rejection of hybridization, the second generation is perceived as a threat. The multiculturalism of the so-called 'new Italians' is believed to challenge identity cohesion; in addition to that, citizenship acquisition would alter the current social and economic power relations.

With the 1990s raise in immigration inflows mainly from Eastern Europe and Africa, the identity discourse came back into the political agenda reactivating the unsolved questions of nationalism and superiority buried without debate after the loss of the colonies established by the winning powers of WWII during the Paris treaty in 1997. The colonies had been removed from the Italian jurisdiction, and this was perceived as a failure by the post-war government, hindering the will to open the debate on this and all the topics related, such as the mystifications of the idea of race and superiority, and whiteness as a defining element of the Italian identity.

According to Mellino (2012), the underlying racism that can be found in the Italian contemporary society is to be understood in the wider framework of globalization. In fact, the development of the concept of modernity – including the ideas of democracy and citizenship – is entangled in the capitalist system of the Western powers that implies a link between transnational phenomena and historical processes. The contemporary international power-balance relations are inextricably connected to last century's imperialism and racial inequality (Mellino, 2012).

Subsequently, public education tends to propose historical narratives accordingly to the existing power balance, obscuring direct connections between the phenomenon of coloniality associated to racist practices and the achievement of modernity standards in the West (Araújo and Maeso, 2015, p.3). Clearly enough the colonial process was not the one and only key factor that led to acquisition of economic power and political domination, nevertheless, according to Araújo and Maeso (2015) school books tend to blur the existence of a direct link and confine the colonialism to the a dark chapter of European history bringing down racism with it.

In the specific case of Italy, there has been a mitigation of the criminal experience of fascism – the so-called "de-fascistization of fascism" (Gentile quoted by Mellino, 2012, p.92) – and colonialism that has further weakened the potential for debate over the racial ties that the historical past and the present society bear. This attitude fostered reinterpretation and reconciliation of the post-war dominating elite in an atmosphere of revisionism that was faced by taking distances from the Italian participation in the creation of the Western concept of race. According to Mellino (2012), in fact, even in the educational realm, racism is passed on and, therefore, considered as a side effect of other social phenomena – thus cutting the relation with the Italian colonial history. In this case "what happens when explicit racist practices (including racist attacks or murders) are dismantled and translated by social agents, the media, and mainstream political discourses as simply problems of labor, housing, migration, identity, economic, crime, or natural xenophobia?" (Mellino, 2012, p. 90).

This approach to racialization denies the possibility of considering it as a variable in the equation of the formation of contemporary society and identity. Ever since the unification of Italy there has been a quest for viable elements bonding the society beyond regional borders. Only in the recent past did the idea of whiteness become one of the national unitary traits. In fact, until the 1920s Italy had been a country of great emigration towards the American continent and there, the Italians were not considered white. A differentiation of skin colour shades existed among the Europeans that confined the Italians to the non-white category. This division lost relevance once African-Americans started to move into cities thus consolidating the black-white binary categorization (Hipfl and Loftsdóttir, 2012). The same distinction that led to the fusion of whites of Caucasians in Europe was fostered by the racial project behind the colonialist process that put race at the basis of the national discourse. This neglected aspect of history highlights the invisible and yet omnipresent nature of whiteness in the Italian contemporary social fabric where Italians see themselves as "racially unmarked" (Lombardi-Diop, 2012, p.176) and are therefore unaware of their race privilege. It is due to this lack of consciousness that the racial discourse struggles to become perceived as relevant in connection to national history in the framework of postcolonial Italy. Especially in the postwar period, "the whitening up of Italians was a process of elevation to wealth, health, social privilege, access to resources, commodities, and technologies, all associated with whiteness" (Lombardi-Diop, 2012, p.177) that signified the opposite of the marginalization

and deprivation that the concept of blackness implied. Whiteness became automatically interwoven with the concept of modern, Christian and European, thus making blackness and Italianness mutually exclusive characteristics (Giuliani, 2013, p. 261).

IV.3. The topic of race, blackness and Italiannes in class:

Generally speaking, the topic of race, is a sensitive topic in European education since it is envisaged as one of the dark pages that European governments have tried to pass as part of the past, no longer connected to the development of contemporary events. The so-called "cultural racism" (Mellino, 2012, p.84) is substituting the racial discourse implying assumed incompatibility of cultural practices. This way the presence of conflicting customs would justify social exclusion of specific ethnic groups that are believed unable or unwilling to adapt to the rules of behaviour defined by the dominant white middle class (Loftsdóttir and Hipfl, 2012; Coppola and Sabelli, 2012).

Even though the topic of racism is not treated in-depth in the framework of the Italian colonial venture in history teaching, the racialization of politics and society during fascism is a topic explicitly faced in class and in textbooks. However, it mainly refers to the issuing of the anti-semitic legislation applied on Italian national territory in Europe. During the second set of focus groups – hinged on the specific case of Italy and colonialism – one of the topics the students were solicited to discuss was that of Italy and the issuing of racial laws. Among the students of all cases involved in the study, the topic of institutionalized racism was discussed exclusively in terms of antisemitism linked to the German legislation. Students talked about norms that discriminated Jews, homosexuals and Gipsies. According to the students' debates, when they hear the term 'racial laws' they immediately and solely think about rights reduction, segregation and deportation within the European sphere during the totalitarian period. The students also underlined the connection between the establishment of racial legislation and the concept of Aryan supremacy, nevertheless this debate did not lead them to make connections to colonialism. A topic that emerged when discussing this specific subject was that of the alleged introduction of racial laws in Italy following the alliance with Nazi Germany.

Confirmation of the lack of connection between racial laws and the colonial process in the students' learning process came during the class observation and by analysing the history manual. The textbook only covers the main happenings related to the intervention in Northern and Eastern Africa explained in the wider framework of the Italian foreign policy resulting in a few paragraphs giving the highlights of the succession of events and dates. The issuing of racial laws, together with any other aspect of the life in the colonies and its administration is not mentioned in the textbook. The issuing of racial legislation dates back to after the occupation of Ethiopia had been completed, the manual does not explain the processes enacted for the maintaining of the territories and is limited to their conquest. The textbook is hinged on the Italian side of the colonial venture and therefore reports the historical landmarks that characterised the political and military drive that led to the creation of the empire. The manual's explicit reference to "the racist traits of the Italian colonialism" (Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p. 82)⁹⁶ is to be found only in the one page providing for in-depth analysis of the colonial venture with link to the shared characteristics with the European imperialism and in connection to the present days. As seen before, this page is considered among the extra contents and hence often not assigned for the individual compulsory study. During the classes I observed there was also no explicit reference to the institution of the set of racial laws created specifically for the colonies. In some classes there was a vaster reference to human rights violation enacted by the colonial institutions including very serious action taken against the local population such as deportation, mass murder, use of gas and the connection to the issue of contemporary historical revisionism. In other cases, the professors only explicitly talked about racism in the case of the anti-semitic legislation. In one case the teacher underlined the theory of the "double interpretation"⁹⁷ (focus group set 1, group A, February 2019) around the creation of anti-semitic legislation where, according to teacher A, it is not clear to the public opinion whether these laws would have existed despite the alliance with Germany. The lack of explicit reference to the introduction of racist regulations in the Overseas empire hinders the students' ability to connect the historical past in the colonies with the current racist revival process investing Italy. Observations made by

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the students over the topic of the racist traits of the fascist regime were mostly directed at the lack of applicability of discrimination based on race in Italy since, according to them, given the already existing different ethnicities present on the territory made it impossible to identify the pure Italian or Aryan race.

The lack of institutional acknowledgement of race as an element publicly discussed laid ground for the widespread understanding of racism as a topic that did not concern the Italian society. The colonialist conscience that for years had been inculcated into the population by propaganda and the media had sank into the cultural baggage, and yet, by avoiding it, the racist myths, behaviour and attitudes had become legitimized by the lack of condemnation. As follows, excuses were found to support the forgetfulness of the colonialist project such as the shortness of the occupation and the enduring myth of the positive results of the colonization carried out by the good-hearted Italians "one of the funding elements of the national character self-representation"⁹⁸ (Labanca, 2002, p. 411). This myth has survived till this day to mitigate the atrocities carried out during the colonial rule which had been propagandised as benevolent project devised for the wealth increase of the Italian proletariat. The concept of the good-hearted Italian is probably no longer perceived in an explicit way linked to colonialism for the new generations but can still be detected as a trait recognized even by the youngsters in the wider immigration discourse.

During the first set of focus groups the students talked about migration flows as a consequence of the European imperialist project in general. When discussing how the two topics are related to one another one student stated that according to him the link between colonization and immigration exists

"because we were too good to them. By colonizing we showed and shared wealth that these populations are now searching for over here"⁹⁹

(focus group set 1, group B, February 2019).

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In this framework the public rhetoric of the good-hearted Italian, or even, the good-hearted European, has pervaded the discourse and has infiltrated in this youngster's perception of the colonial and migration phenomena. One more student contributed to confirming this statement since during the brainstorming related to concepts that came to the students' minds when talking about imperialism in general was "thirty euros per day"¹⁰⁰ (focus group set 1, group B, February 2019). This expression, that has pervaded the political discourse in the media by right-wing anti-immigration exponents lately, hints at the present-day Italian struggle in the welcoming of migrants and refugees reaching Italy through the Mediterranean route. The amount of thirty euros per day is the sum that allegedly, according to some politicians, refugees in Italy receive as pocket money; a statement that was proved wrong. The polemic around this topic led to controversies and radicalization of the anti-immigration movements. The fact that one student immediately thinks of unfair privileged treatment for refugees as the first contribution in a debate on the topic of imperialism underlines the survival of negative stereotypes towards the African people, the lack of historical clarity on the contemporary happenings and their relation to the past and the power of the media.

The issue of racialization of society and memory of national identity traits came back to light only between the decades of the 1970s to 1990s, when the role of Italy started changing due to its geopolitical position, economic development and international dynamics that turned Italy into an immigration-receiving country. Before, Italy used to be the origin of a significant number of emigrants – around 27 millions between mid 1800s and 1900s (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo, 2015; Allievi, 2010). The institutional lack of advancement regarding the management of immigration, considered a temporary phenomenon rather than a complex irreversible global process to handle systematically, led to the creation of emergency solutions. The enactment of narrow-sighted regularizations came with disregard towards the potential outcomes of the immigration phenomenon as a stabilizing process (Allievi, 2010). The lack of debate on the matter, over time, gave rise to the development of a “logic of repression and negation” (Allievi, 2010, p. 93) in the public opinion that anti-immigration movements took advantage of to build their xenophobic rhetoric. In this framework, it is possible to find a link between the unquestioned colonial heritage and the

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race discourse of the present-day social and political Italian environment. According to Labanca (2002), the presence on the Italian territory of immigrants, counting with an increase of Africans (ISTAT, 2016)¹⁰¹, was met with a re-surfacing of colonialist racial stereotypes. The settling down of foreigners has been leading to an increasingly multicultural social fabric including second-generation Italians¹⁰² who, according to ISTAT 2016 Report between 1993 and 2014, add up to almost one million.

Blackness or traits relatable to Africa have emerged to be perceived as negative in present day social discourse among youngsters during the focus groups. Even though many decades have gone by since the issuing of the apartheid laws in 1937 and the propagandising of colonial invasion under the fascist regime, the attitude of otherization remains strongly embedded in the Italian society. Skin colour is still a strongly differentiating characteristic that in the common understanding tells apart immigrants and Italians. During the debate, when the students were asked to discuss the legacy of the Italian occupation in the former colonial territories one student commented that

"for sure the colour of the skin was not something that they [the populations of the colonial territories] inherited"

(focus group set 2, group D, February 2019).

This statement implies that skin colour is regarded as a substantial element of division implying that black does not equals Italian – or European.

Exoticism is also an existing feature in the perception of what is considered to be 'other' and as such no assimilation can take place. An example of this can be drawn by another statement of one high school student who participated in my research. When discussing

¹⁰¹ ISTAT, 2016, "Migrazioni internazionali e interne della popolazione residente", https://www.istat.it/it/files/2017/11/Report_Migrazioni_Anno_2016.pdf

¹⁰² The term 'second generation' here implies the children of immigrants living in Italy. In this essay the term second generation, which in the strictest sense applies only to Italian-born children of immigrant parents here includes also the 1.25 (children arrived in Italy by the age of six), 1.5 (children arrived in Italy between six and twelve) and 1.75 (children arrived in Italy after the age of twelve) Rumbaut categories (Andall, 2002).

unitary features of national identity in Italy one student intervened by stating that language cannot be considered an element shared by the entire population since

"in the South they speak something like Arabic"¹⁰³

(focus group set 2, group D, February 2019).

This statement is an example of otherization: Arabic in this context implies the quintessence of what is not standard Italian, what cannot be assimilated and recognized as relevant to Italianness. The very use of the term 'Arabic' might be fruit of the survival of the attitude imported from a colonial era in which the term 'moor' was used in reference to any African person (Labanca, 2002). This attitude has remained part of the Italian culture and evolved into the use of generic terms referred to African nationalities bearing a socially construct meaning: "Terms such as Marocchini (Moroccans) [...] [are] used as a sort of racial shorthand by Italians to signify everyone other than white immigrants, regardless of origin. It is meant to conjure up stereotypical images of African immigrants" (Angel-Ajani, 2000, p.339). Comparing Southern dialects with the Arabic language also bears another denotation that is the still unresolved Southern question that persists as a social issue since the unification of Italy. The annexation of Southern territories opened the questions of the whiteness of Southern Italians. This further led to the emergence of anti-Southern racism in 1960 in relation to economic and labour market boom. Racism had the supposed function of managing and domesticating internal migration during this period of both great economic and social changes; the traces of this targeted racism still pervade the collective social sphere (Mellino, 2012).

The element of race, though present in the social and political discourse, is often not perceived as a topic of debate deeply rooted in the Italian historical and cultural tradition; race is one of the issues "often unnamed and ultimately silenced" (Lombardi-Diop, 2012, p.175). Since the end of the fascist regime the Italian society has showed inability to capture the complexity of the fascist and colonial phenomena, hence mostly reproducing old

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narratives of fears and desires. The issue of race does not overtly appear in the public and political discourse as related to national identity unless it is by opposition. Race, in fact, is automatically associated to the concepts of blackness and immigration thus making of "whiteness [...] the nonracialized norm" (Lombardi-Diop, 2012, p.178). The self-perception of the population as white has played a fundamental role in the definition of the nation as homogeneous by using ethnic uniqueness as a way to overcome the internal political, economic and cultural fragmentation of the country. According to Giuliani (2013) the self-definition of the Italian population as white passed through two processes: hetero-referring racism – considering white whoever is not black – and self-referring racism according to which whiteness is a feature unequivocally associated with cultural, racial and historical heritage – Christianity, ties with the Mediterranean and Latin background. It is this subsequent forgetfulness of race as pivotal in the shaping of the Italian identity that characterizes "the nonraciality of postcolonial Italy" (Lombardi-Diop, 2012, p.176) in an era in which other postcolonial realities are facing identity debate including topics of colonialism and racism as inherent to their social and political discourse (Lombardi-Diop, 2012). The lack of race as a concept that belongs to the Italian sphere and the normalization of whiteness emerged also during the second set of focus groups when talking about elements of unity for the Italian society and identity during the colonial period. The students of group B were discussing the fascist focus on superiority of the Italians over the colonial populations when, after talking about technological and cultural advancement, just one student timidly dared to explicitly state that one of the elements that made the Italians feel united and superior could have been the colour of the skin. Even if often silenced the racist attitude in the Italian society is perceived in everyday life as from the words of one student that was reasoning on the legacy of the colonial experience visible in the Italian society:

"the idea of superiority that many people still feel [...] the disdain and disgust towards other people depending only on their skin colour, a sort of prejudice that has older roots"

(focus group set 2, group E, February 2019).

Apart from these two examples in which the term 'skin colour' explicitly appeared, the almost total absence of overt reference to the topic of race from all the other debates, and the embarrassment with which this topic was faced in the above-mentioned examples, suggest that the topic of race is still a taboo in the Italian public discourse even when related to the historical dimension of colonialism in which race played a significant political role. The changes Italy underwent in the post-war period boosted this topic into oblivion since one of the main concerns for institutions was that of concentrating on the creation of a new Italy characterised by economic prosperity, modernity and homogeneity. According to Lombardi-Diop (2012), in this capitalist era of easily available commodities, television and advertising played a key role in transmitting ideals through the consumer culture. It resulted in the emergence of an obsession with hygiene, whiteness and cleanliness. These ever present and omnipresent concepts provided the tool for the washing away of crimes of the fascist colonialist racist regime (Lombardi-Diop, 2011). The obsession for spotlessness at all levels allowed the normalization of white Italianness as “a-historical normativity” (Lombardi-Diop, 2011) causing for any other non-white standard to be perceived as deviant and associated with disadvantaged socio-economic reference. At the same time, the post-war period also brought along the desire to break with the Mediterranean stereotype of “dark, passionate, instinctive” (Lombardi-Diop, 2011) that had characterised the foreign pre-fascist perception of the Italians. Italians became aligned with the whitened, racially muted new image of themselves following the European standard. The rhetorical whitening of the nation, inculcated as a moral standard as much as an aesthetic imperative in the Italian population from North to South, had been favoured by the colonial project during the regime: the Italians perceived themselves as white in opposition to the African individuals (Giuliani, 2013).

According to Coppola and Sabelli (2012) the contemporary perception of blackness and Italianness as opposing categories can be traced back to the fact that “the construction of Italian identity during the colonial period has often relied on race as a marker of irredeemable alterity and threat” (Coppola and Sabelli, 2012, p. 144). This same feeling nowadays survives as nationalist reaction to immigration that only in the 1990s started shaking a country whose government was not ready to accept and manage the changes it would bring about. Since then, the non-white presence has long been restricted to subordinate workplaces and social spaces. With the stabilization of the migratory

phenomenon and the increase in the numbers of second generation children, white hegemony has slowly started to be challenged by the so-called “space invaders” (Giuliani, 2013). Their joint social relevance and blackness are questioning the hegemonic Italian political and social realm. In fact, "while during colonialism 'mixed race' children jeopardised the rigid colour hierarchy, today the so-called 'second generations' are the ones who are questioning the legislative and constitutional racism that found citizenship on lineage rather than on *ius soli* " (Coppola and Sabelli, 2012, p. 151). This issue is pivotal when it comes to the understanding of identity and belonging since "blackness and Italianness have always been mutually exclusive terms, although the ones who are racialized, in postcolonial Italy, are no longer the African colonised, but the immigrants coming from the global South and East, now claiming to be the new Italian citizens" (Coppola and Sabelli, 2012, p. 148)

In the contemporary atmosphere of "Italy's fear of miscegenation in the face of the increasing heterogeneity of its population" (Lombardi-Diop, 2011) the term racism is often still avoided in favour of more politically correct terminology. In fact, it is not entirely correct to state that racism was not present in the students' statements, it was just never overtly used as a term, yet often implied. Especially when talking about the legacy that can be found in the Italian society and politics of the colonial experience, instead of talking about racism the students diverted their speech to the concept of immigration. Peoples movement is, in fact, sensed as one of the direct consequences of colonialism. According to the students, nothing is visible in Italy of its colonial experience except

"a lot of immigrants"¹⁰⁴, "They are all coming back, once it was us going there and now they are coming here, they want to colonize us"¹⁰⁵

(focus group set 2, group B, February 2019).

The general response to the debate hint of what remained of the colonial experience in Italian society was almost always 'nothing', except in one case in which one student stated:

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"it seems to me that the Italians do not really have a positive opinion of the immigrants"¹⁰⁶

(focus group set 2, group C, February 2019).

According to the students, in addition to immigration being related to the colonial history of Europe – rather than directly connected to the so-called national history –, it is also perceived that the inflow of migrants has become a new unifying element. Students have expressed the opinion that, unlike the past, they sense that the Italians from all regions are uniting in the fight to the external enemy. In the past, the Northern and Southern populations were divided by prejudice and anti-Southern racism, today they are united against the foreigner. The students stated that they feel the topic of immigration occupies a relevant role and amount of space in today's public discourse in the media, yet, during the discussions, they realised that they hardly ever hear the term colonialism either in relation to immigration or on its own; it is not perceived by them as a relevant topic for the Italian public opinion. During the focus groups the debate developed into the topic of potential connection between the phenomenon of imperialism and that of immigration, the students' talk was filled with uncertainty and guessing. During this stage of the focus groups the expressions of doubtfulness such as "maybe", "I am thinking about it just now", "it could be that", "I am just guessing", "I am not sure that this is right" were frequent and underlined the fact that the way in which today the means of communication and education tools that reach the youngster, lack wide historical perspective that would allow students to make sense of the phenomena of colonialism, racism and migration thoroughly.

History teaching and the tools created for this purpose generally tend to legitimize the existing political arrangements and create homogeneity when it comes to national identity and ideals boosting positive interpretation of the historical events involving the country thus naturalizing the existing status quo (Araújo and Maeso, 2010). In all this, the textbook holds a significant role in as much as it tends to simplify the processes and events within the framework of binary categorization and Europe-centred standards. This way, whatever does

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not apply to the standards of nation state, modernity or liberal democracy becomes intended as outdated, not alternative (Araújo and Maeso, 2010). Textbooks cannot be analysed only on the basis of the contents they present but equal attention needs to be paid to the absence of topics. In the case of the textbook in use in *Primo Levi* high school, when it comes to colonialism, the experience of the locals is entirely inexistent hence driving the students to consider the personal dimension of the colonial process unworthy of mention and reflexion upon, thus de-personalizing the experience and reproducing unequal power relations (Araújo and Maeso, 2010).

It is further necessary to analyse the process of formation of ideas on the topic of colonialism and potential links to the contemporary Italian society in the light of the national and European atmosphere when it comes to racism and migration. In recent years there has been a revival of the sense of national belonging "as a fundamental public value" (Mezzadra, 2012, p.37) in Italy in the light of the changes in political assets and people's mobility brought about by globalization, denationalization and the capitalist system. According to Mellino and Mezzadra (2012; 2012), racism is being used as a political tool in response to economic instability, labour market demands and border management and as an "internal supplement" (Mezzadra, 2012, p.40) to nationalism. Racism has proved to be a flexible concept that can fit different historical, political and social situations; even so the way in which it is expressed in Italy is still linked to the fascist, colonialist and anti-Semitic "archive of rhetorical phrases that contemporary public discourse can draw on in its various strategies for stigmatizing immigrants" (Mezzadra, 2012, p.41). An example of this, drawn from the fieldwork, is the widespread trend to talk about Africa as a whole, one undefined cluster of names and peoples, the survival of myths that see African peoples as underdeveloped and less advanced both at technological and "cultural level"¹⁰⁷(focus group set 2, group B, February 2019) and the description of Ethiopia during the class as a "backward territory"¹⁰⁸ (teacher B, February 2019). The colonialist expressions *faccetta nera*, 'sandbox'¹⁰⁹ and 'a place in the sun' survive to this day in the popular language. However, the history behind these expressions, the

¹⁰⁷ Free Translation from the Original Italian

¹⁰⁸ Free Translation from the Original Italian

¹⁰⁹ Referred to Libya, lacking useful natural resources for the conqueror to draw profit from

connection to the fascist period, to the racist legislation, to the domination of foreign lands by means of force and violation of human rights are hardly ever known or acknowledged by those who use them. Consequently, these expressions are emptied of their original significance. Even if the majority of the students had heard of these expressions, they often did not know their colonial root; this leaves room for nostalgic and exotic meaning to be attached to these, or other, expressions whose historical significance has been lost over the years.

Conclusion:

The postcolonial nature of the Italian society is a topic that has been absent from public debate until recently and only in the last few years it has started to become accounted for in the academic and cultural landscape. However, the myths that surround the Italian colonial experience still pervade the public discourse. Traces of its legacy can be studied by looking into the youngsters' perception of the historical phenomenon and the link that can be established with the contemporary Italian society.

Since Italian colonialism is almost completely absent from the public discourse, school is the environment in which all youngsters get in touch with this topic during history lessons. By envisaging the field of education as a suitable environment for the study of the legacy of the memory of the Italian colonial experience, it is important to consider that history teaching does not only aim at giving the students notions about the past. In fact, this subject also provides the youngsters the tools to interpret present-day social and political situation they live in, in order to shape their awareness as future active citizens.

This study focused on analysing the perception of the Italian colonialism both on the knowledge imparting and beneficiary ends of the school system. The elements examined were the history textbook in use, the teaching approach used during the lessons and the perception of the role of history teaching and colonialism in the contemporary society according to teachers through interviews. As far as the receiving end of the education is concerned, the study focused on examining the students' understanding of the colonial phenomenon, their shaping of conceptions about the contemporary society and the way in which the colonial legacy affects them.

Being public schooling part of the institutional state system of education that manages and addresses the core topics and modalities of teaching, school can be perceived as teaching a set of consensual notions publicly accepted due to their historical political and social relevance. Nevertheless, through the creation of official national guidelines, politics plays a pivotal role in the definition of the contents of education that can be exploited in order to define the values of nationalism, identity and belonging – according to the current government address. Therefore, policy makers, historians, textbook authors and teachers,

besides influencing, are influenced by the cultural hegemony system of the time and place they live. In fact, "ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power also being studied" (Said, 1979, p.5), this is the case of institutionally-endorsed education and its approach to the history of colonialism that cannot automatically be considered unbiased. These actors, however, cannot be considered a passive result of history or mere vehicles that transmit state-disseminated notions. Through their insight of history and their approach to teaching it, writing about it, defining which topics the national history programme will feature, they pass down their own interpretation of the historical events; this aspect is what marks history teaching a political act.

One of the main elements under analysis throughout the implementation of all the methodological tools, was that of language as the main means of meaning conveying. Language constantly produces and reproduces contents, patterns of ideas and worldview insights. The research showed that generalized stereotypes remain part of the language due to the survival of myths in the passing down of the history of Italian colonialism. The students, in fact, struggled to neutrally express themselves regarding colonization and its legacy and ended up reproducing stereotypes based on Eurocentric assumptions and binary categorization. Besides language, visual aids also contribute to root stereotyped perceptions.

In addition to analysing the nature of the contents present in the textbook and the lessons, the study also focused on the absence of controversial elements shedding a negative light over the Italian colonial occupation, on the lack of the periphery viewpoint and the connection with the present-day socio-political establishment. It is in this framework that nationalist and Eurocentric myths, an orientalist vision of Africa and the colonialist mindset can be either reiterated or questioned depending on the way in which they are addressed. This analysis led to the identification of three different teaching approaches based on the elements analysed: a balanced, indulgent and critical approach.

Besides the teachers' and textbook's approach to the history of colonialism, a number of other elements can influence the youngsters' insight in the colonial legacy and memory, such as the family background and socio-political context of upbringing. Generally speaking the topic of fascism is rooted in the common knowledge among the youngsters too, however,

the colonial phenomenon is treated as a parenthesis of the fascist history thus fostering the myth of a 'different colonialism' to the point that students fail to associate the Italian experience with the wider European phenomenon of imperialism. This approach further limits the learning process in matter of relevance of the colonial process as far as international reputation and consolidation of consent are concerned. Even though it has been found that other elements have a real influence on the youngsters' perception of the colonial process and tangential withstanding social implications, the role of public schooling remains pivotal. It is in fact through this institution that all the citizens-to-be get in touch with the topic and therefore the analysis of the modalities cannot prescind the study of this topic.

The Italian imperialist rhetoric took advantage of the poverty of the people and of the subaltern position of Italy in Europe; to make up for these shortcomings, the conservative factions of Crispi's and Giolitti's governments and the fascist leaders attempted to create internal consent around the colonial venture by means of the rhetoric of the demographic colonialism and the civilizing mission. Once the diplomatic, military and economic dare of the Italian colonial initiative came to an end in 1947, the moderate Italian postwar government covered the evidence of the Italian wrongdoings in Africa and thus kept alive the myths of the 'good-hearted Italian' and the merciful colonialism. Decades later, historiographic records proved that the propaganda around the Italian deeds in Africa did not meet what had actually happened. As summarized by Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005) "During the colonial era, the Italian state attained a notable primacy in military aggressions: the world's first military use of airpower and aerial bombardments (during the 1911-1912 Italo-Turkish war); the first country to widely use gases in violation of the 1925 Gas Protocol (in Libya and Eritrea in the 1920s, in Ethiopia in the late 1930s); the first European country to wage a large- scale war after World War I (the Ethiopian invasion); and the first Western European country in the twentieth century to employ genocidal tactics outside of the context of world war (in the late 1920s and early 1930s, in the Cyrenaica region of Libya, through a combination of mass population transfers, forced marches, and mass detention in concentration camps)" (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, 2005, p. 4).

While it is true that the Italian experience presented sensible differences compared to the development of the French and British colonial empire, most of the practices and attitudes employed by the Italian political and military force between 1889 and 1947 were

common to the European imperialist phenomenon. Nevertheless, although historiographical research and postcolonial studies have been trying to dispel the above-mentioned mystifications, the aspect that still fosters a generalized feeling of self-absolution is that of the brevity and the geographical limitations of the Italian colonial venture. Examples of the withstanding revisionist attitude towards the colonial past can still be observed both in the intellectual and the political landscape; every time a public figures make controversial statements about this topic, the debate is reignited bringing myths back to the surface. A couple of recent examples are the 2018 article on a national newspaper entitled "Do not open fire on the Italian colonialism. Besides the interests, there was civilization" and the 2019 post on social media by the undersecretary to the Ministry of foreign Affairs stating that colonialism was never part of the Italian historical tradition. Declarations of this nature still exist in present-day Italy since the issues of fascist and colonial unattended responsibilities, national identity and racism are still disputed elements in the framework of the Italian collective memory. It is on the ground of history teaching that this ideological battle between historical revisionism and acceptance of the past is being fought.

As proved from the examples above, although school is to be considered still a fundamental keystone in the personal growth of youngsters and the in the shaping of their worldview, education is not the only significantly influential source of information about the history of colonialism and its legacy. The media – Internet in particular – have acquired a considerable amount of power in shaping the opinions of the youngsters. Means of communication external to the educational environment convey content that can influence the youngsters' perception of phenomena related to the colonial legacy such as the issues of racism, immigration, the second generation Italians, the Italian postcolonial condition, the national feeling of belonging, the Italian role in European history, the economic underdevelopment of so-called third world among others. Television and advertising, for instance, employ exoticism and diversity as marketing strategies that tend to reproduce a binary categorization discourse and disguise discrimination behind rhetoric instead of breaking the cycle and exploits diversity to promote an ideological blindness towards the biased language of race power relations (Ponzanesi, 2012; Hipfl, Loftsdóttir 2012).

In addition to the contents conveyed by the mass-reaching means of communication, the very nature of modern media based on brevity, constant freshness of news, immediacy,

self-referentiality of the discourse and overflow of information "weakens the links between personal experience and public memory" (Connerton, 2009, p.84) and can result in an "amnesiac effect" (Connerton, 2009, p. 82).

However, these mass-reaching feature of these same means of communication such as press, the internet and television might prove to be simple and useful instruments to be employed in the school environment in order to reverse the orientalist trend and introduce the postcolonial debate. In fact, literature and cinema proved to play a significant role in reshaping the awareness over the colonial times according to historian Alessandro Triulzi (2014) and Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego – still depending on the approach to the historical past and the perspective privileged-.

As far as literature is concerned, second-generation as well as migrant writers have been gaining increasing visibility in Italy in the last years and in many cases these artists embrace literature as a decolonizing weapon. The stories they tell are fundamentally different from those narrated by writers of Italian background, their stories are a mix of perspective, the colonized or migrant figure for once is not regarded as a background character nor a passive victim, it is a main well-rounded actor of its life that actively becomes part of Italian history due to the historical events that created a bond between two cultures.

The institutional recognition of these novels as Italian literature (as opposed to the past in which the trend was that of separating Italian from migrant literature even though the language used as a means of expression was Italian for both) is a sign of the decolonization process and of the awareness gaining about the interconnectedness of historical events (Triulzi, 2014).

Introducing instruments like these in the history teaching approach would help develop awareness of the colonial legacy and its influence in everyday life, it could interrupt the reproduction of stereotypes linked to binary categories and give space to the creation of ideas based on genuine interaction with the subject thus overcoming at least in part the limits of the school manual and of the teachers' background.

Talking about Italian colonialism means more than discussing history; it means acknowledging that the limited Italian occupation in Eastern and Northern Africa does not

make the responsibility for the atrocities committed less significant, nor does it make the Italian postcolonial condition less urgent an issue to face since while it is true that " Most of the direct criminals are dead, [...] the humus of racism, intolerance and aggression that nurtured the crimes – the fascist legacy – is not. " (Petrusewicz, 2004, p.270). Talking about the colonial legacy, in the picture of the global changes, means to tie together the strings of the economic capitalist assets, labour market, immigration policies, racism, and Italian historic and cultural patrimony.

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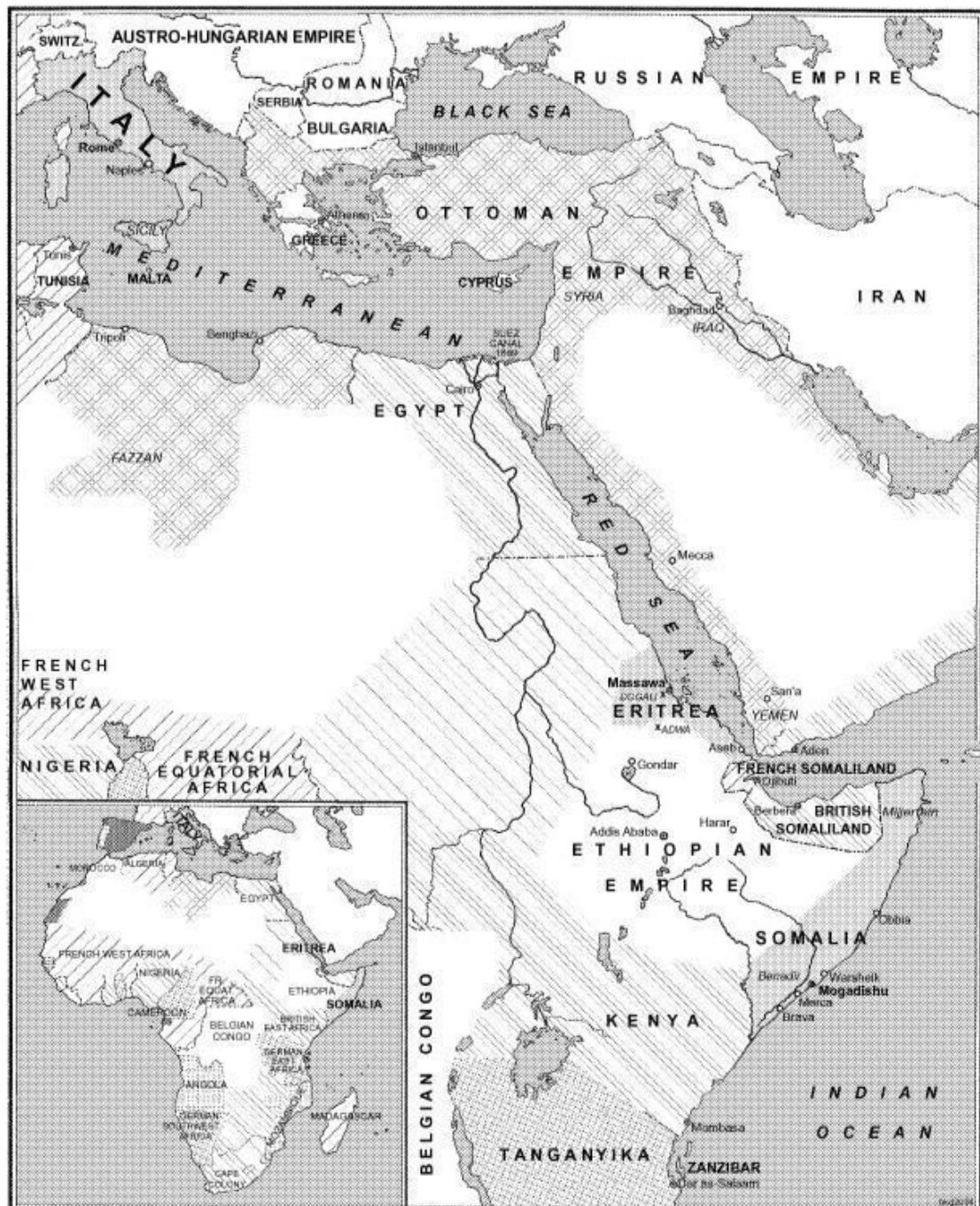
Appendixes:

Appendix A: Textbook grid of analysis.

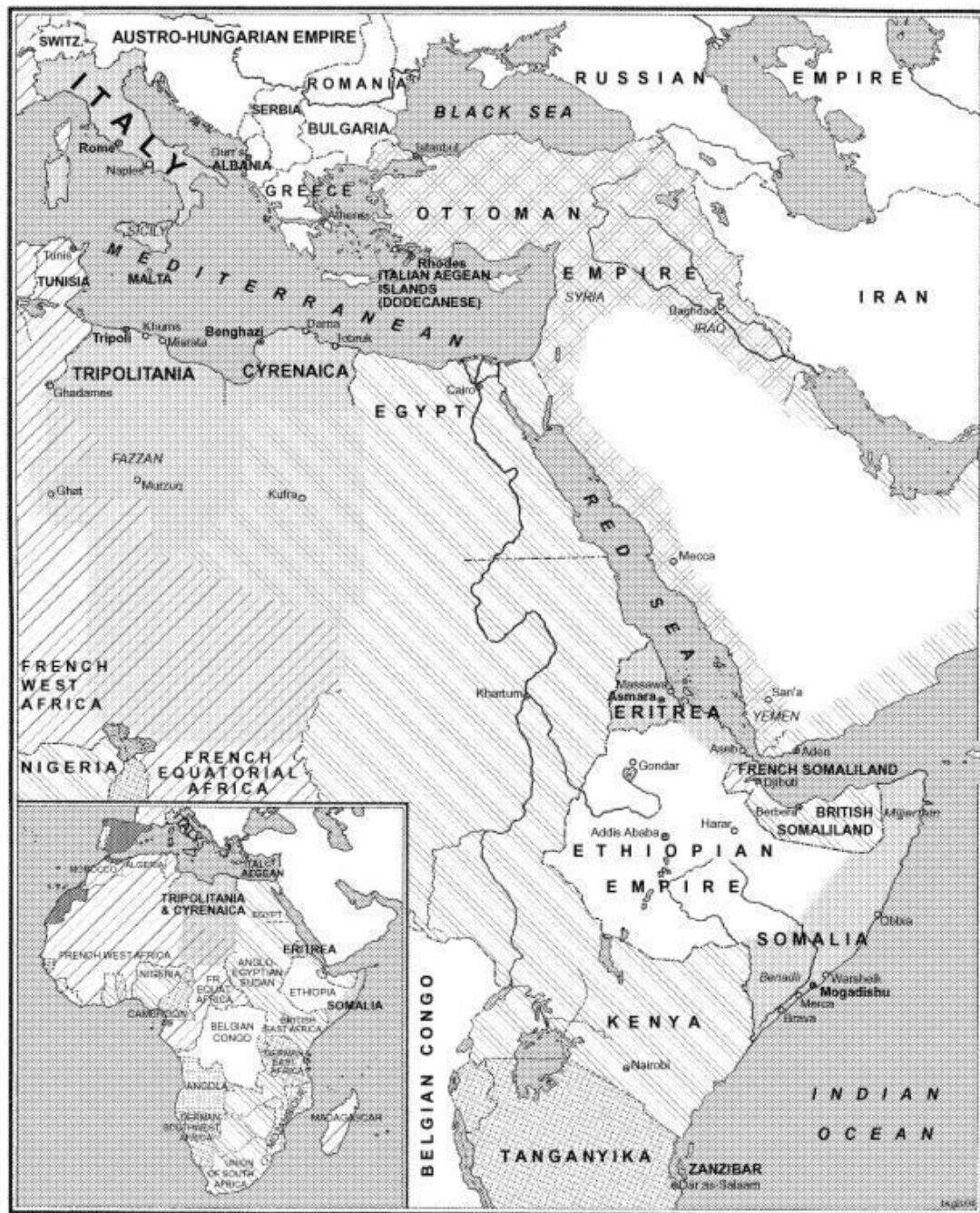
Textbook features	Description	Elements of analysis	Resulting Approaches
Extra supports to the text	<p>1) Images (e.g. historical pictures, historical pamphlets)</p> <p>2) Maps and graphics (e.g. timelines, geopolitical maps)</p> <p>3) Historical documents of the colonial times (e.g. diary extracts, military report extracts, propaganda pamphlets, newspaper articles, letters, poems related to the colonial experience)</p>	<p>1) Do the colonized population appear in the images? If so under which circumstance? Are the local people in the colonies depicted as oppressed? Are the local people in the colonies depicted in the act of military or political resistance to the occupation? Do the pamphlets depict the racist aspect of the regime or only the celebratory side?</p> <p>2) Does the map represent the evolution of the colonial occupation over time? Does the map show European presence in Africa at the same time as the Italian colonial empire settles (thus visually including Italy in the European imperialist project)?</p> <p>3) Do documents talk about life in the colonies? Do documents report the unattended expectation for Italian soldiers and settlers in the colonies in opposition to what the propaganda divulged? Are any of the authors of the documents native citizens of the occupied territories?</p>	<p>Balanced approach</p> <p>Indulgent Approach</p> <p>Critical Approach</p>
Historical people named	Analysis of which ones are historical people named as taking part in the colonial experience	<p>Are African people named? If so in which context?</p> <p>Are the Italian military and political figures involved in the colonial experience named in relation to the actions they carried out in the colonies?</p>	
Language and vocabulary	<p>1) Apologetic language</p> <p>2) Denunciation terms</p> <p>3) Reader-engaging terminology</p> <p>4) Biased vocabulary</p>	<p>1) Terms, expressions and writing that aims at underlining the Italian responsibilities in the colonial territories</p> <p>2) Terminology that reports the brutality of the techniques employed by the Italian army to occupy African territories and underlines the violation of international treaties and human rights</p> <p>3) Techniques such as the use of first person narration and the context in which it is used</p> <p>4) Terms and expressions reinstating myths and false beliefs</p>	
Relationship established with present-day events	References to contemporary events involving Italy and the former colonies that can have a connection with the colonial past	The current political situation of the colonies in connection to events dating back to the colonial times such as internal unrest among the Ethiopian ethnic groups, war between Ethiopia and Eritrea and the position Italy held in this conflict, unrest in the three regions of Libya once formally united under the Italian rule, international relations among Italy, the Horn of Africa and Libya after the decolonization, the Italian trusteeship in Somalia, racism revival in Italy, the global migration phenomenon, the Italian policy to immigration and second generation, where signs of the colonial past can be found in the Italian society and territory etcetera	
Myths and beliefs	In which way the narration and the tools supporting the text address myths and false beliefs over the colonial experience by reinstating them or by deconstructing them.	Mutilated victory, Roman empire heritage in the Mediterranean, the civilizing mission, the <i>good-hearted Italians</i> , <i>The Great Proletarian</i> , Italian colonialism being different and uneconomic, the inferiority of African populations and their need to be ruled, the colonial project led by the drive to discover new worlds.	
Events left out of the narration	In the historical narration, the events reported influence the reader's understanding of the happenings. Leaving out pieces of content conveys significance too, since the perception of development of the historical processes might result biased.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social, economic and political systems existing in the colonies before and after the Italian occupation - The racist nature of the fascist colonial project - The Italian relationship with other European colonial powers present in Northern and Eastern Africa during the colonial times - The differences and similarities between the liberal and fascist administration of the colonies - The economic drive to colonization - The similarities of the Italian colonial experience and the rest of Europe's - Life in the colonies, decolonization, the resistance movements in the colonies - The peculiarity of Eritrea as the first colony providing Italy soldiers to fight in the conquering of the other colonies 	

Appendix B: Maps of the progression of the Italian occupation in Northern and Eastern Africa.

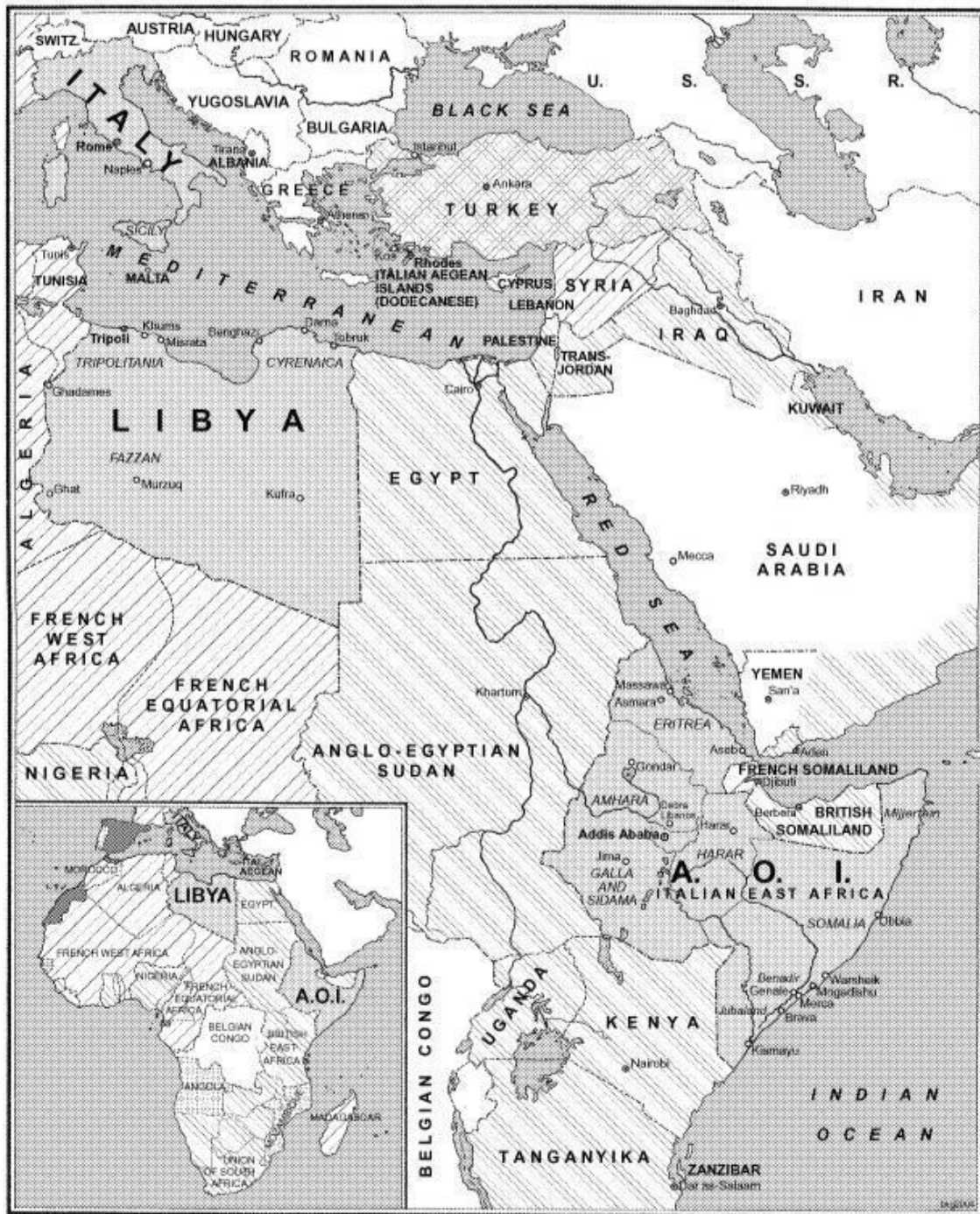
(Source: Ben-Ghiat, Ruth and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005)



Italian colonial possessions, 1897 (map by Brien K. Garnand).



Map of Italian colonial possessions, 1913 (map by Brien K. Garnand).



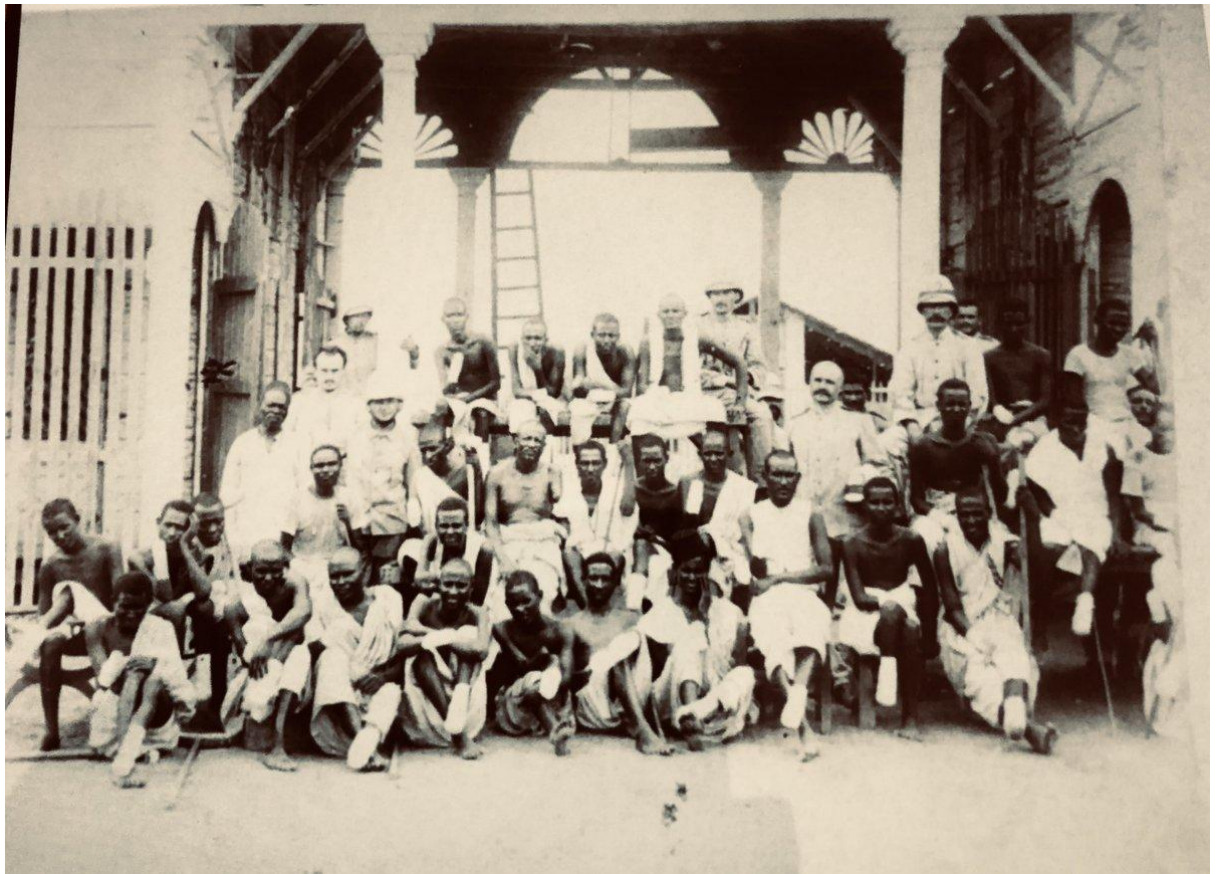
Map of Italian Empire, 1939 (map by Brien K. Garnand).

Appendix C: National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education.

National guidelines for history teaching in high school by the Italian Ministry of Education (p. 17-19)
<http://www.istruzione.it/alternanza/allegati/NORMATIVA%20ASL/INDICAZIONI%20NAZIONALI%20PER%20I%20LICEI.pdf>

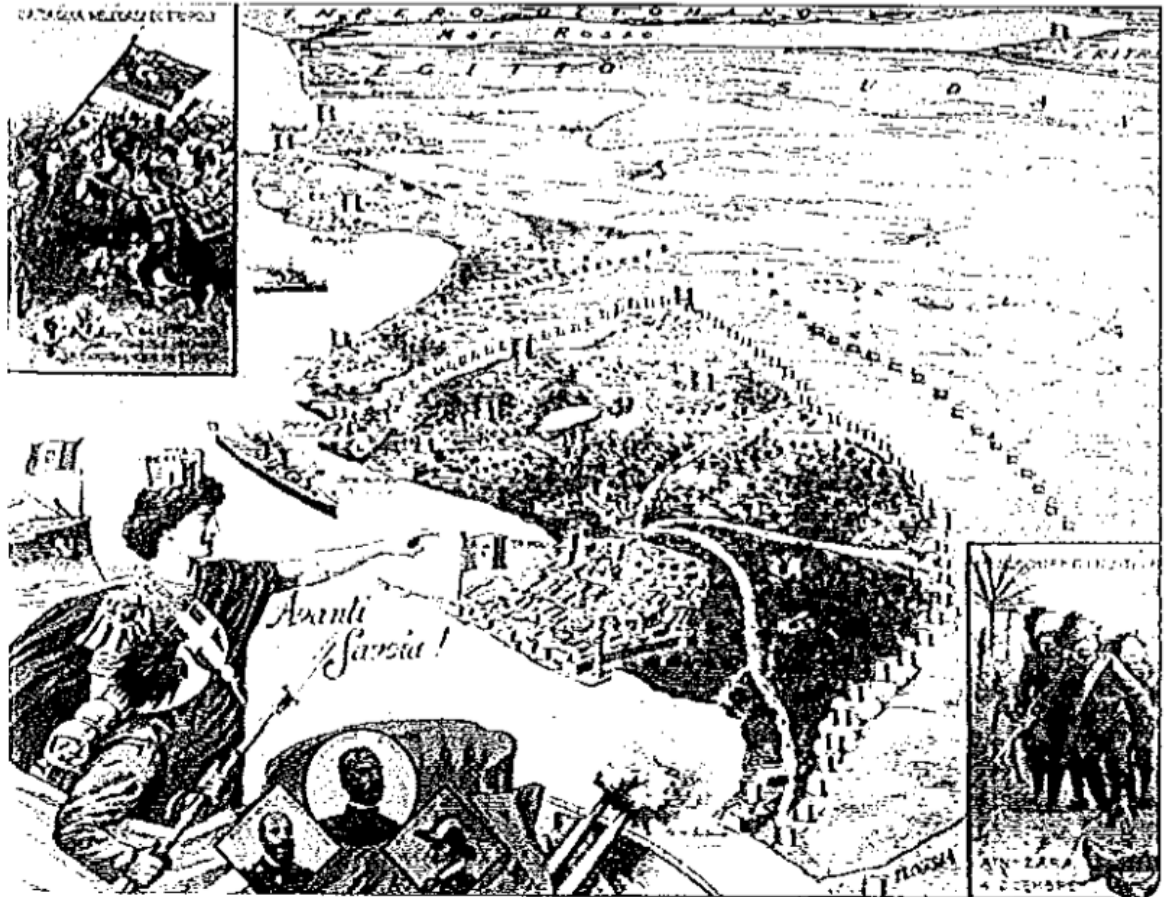
Appendix D: Visual support present in the analyzed textbook "*Dialogo con la storia e l'attualità 3. L'età contemporanea*", by Brancati Antonio and Trebi Pagliarani, 2012.¹¹⁰

- "General Baratieri with askari (Eritreans serving Italy) after the battle of Adwa, 1896" (Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p.11)



¹¹⁰ All the captions have been translated from the original Italian.

- "In this celebratory postcard the Italian flags wave over the Gargaresh fort, near Tripoli. Italy incites its soldiers (with the slogan 'Forward Savoy') to carry on the colonial conquest" (Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p.81)



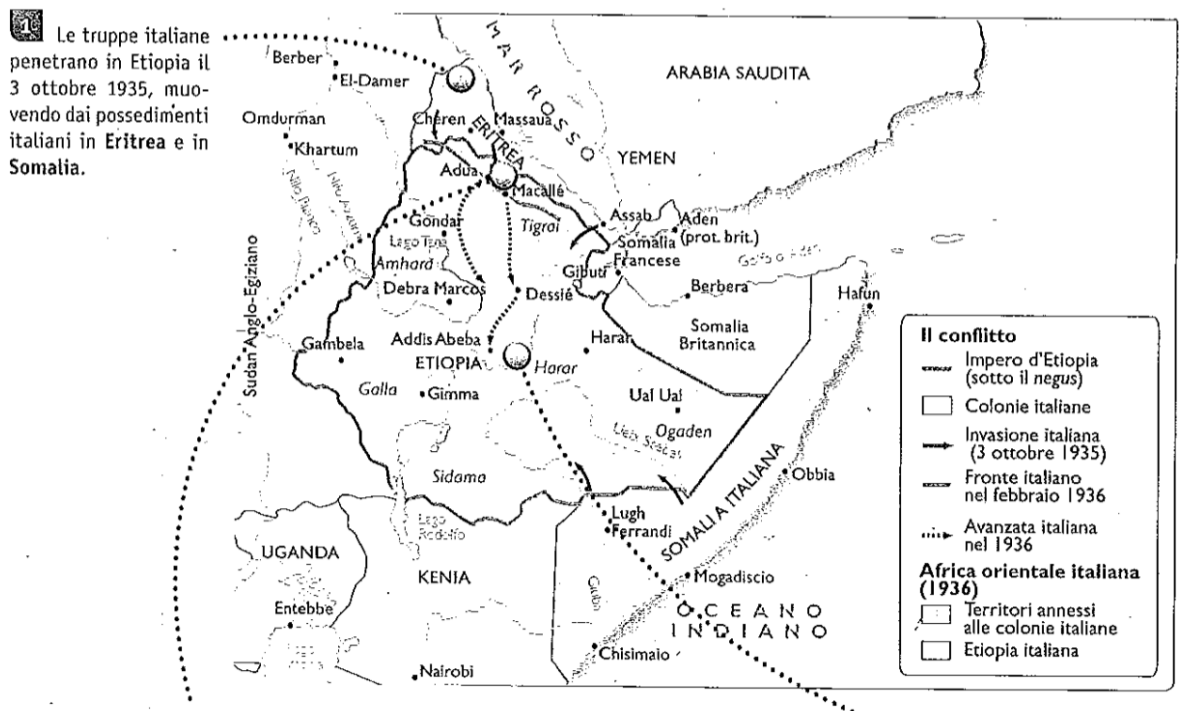
- "Gheddafi with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during one of his visit to Rome in 2008, closing with the signature of a friendship and cooperation Treaty between Italy and Libya" (Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p.82)



- "The military propaganda. The 'Fascist institute of the Italian Africa' was one of the institutions in charge of propagandizing to the population the colonial enterprise and its positive economic outcomes" (Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p.306)



- "The Fascist expansion in Africa" (Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p.307)



2 Le basi di rifornimento sono piuttosto distanti: ogni aiuto in uomini e mezzi deve infatti partire dall'Italia, cioè da 4000 chilometri di distanza da Massaua e 8000 da Mogadiscio, i due soli porti dei quali è possibile usufruire.

3 Il 9 maggio 1936 le truppe italiane raggiungono Addis Abeba costringendo alla fuga il *negus* Haile Selassie.

- "The Fascist exploits in Africa were stained by the atrocities and massacres as depicted by this photo of the Italian occupation of Addis Ababa"(Brancati and Pagliarani, 2012, p.308)

